

TEARS IN THE FABRIC: TRACING SOCIAL TRAUMA IN THE GOLDEN AGE TELEPLAY

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Tears in the Fabric: Tracing Social Trauma in the Golden Age Teleplay

*I'm looking and I'm dreaming for the first time
I'm inside and I'm outside at the same time
And everything is real
Do I like the way I feel?*

*When the world crashes in into my living room
Television man made me what I am*

- "Television Man," Talking Heads

INTRODUCTION

Ideas come from the Earth. They come from every human experience that you've either witnessed or have heard about, translated into your brain in your own sense of dialogue, in your own language form. Ideas are born from what is smelled, heard, seen, experienced, felt emotionalized. Ideas are probably in the air, like little tiny items of ozone.

- Rod Serling, 1972

Prospero proclaimed that, “we are such stuff as dreams are made on.” Drama is a ‘we’ that stages our dreams; for our theatrical forms are ‘made on’, or drawn from, or imagined into life out of the air that Rod Serling asserts is awash with a culture’s ideas, images, sensations, emotions, and words. Sometimes we have room to meander amongst the stuff of the world, at other times, the world crashes right in upon us (into our living rooms as David Byrne would have it). In either case, whether invited or imposed, the world must be engaged. Drama is a deep and ancient means to do so.

The theatre scholar Marvin Carlson has written that, “all theatre is a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition” (Carlson 11). By this he suggests to us that theatre is a repository of personal and cultural memory and that this memorial function is particularly concerned with experiences that haunt us—ghosts that cannot be forgotten, or conversely, pains that cannot be remembered.

Drama plays a central role--an essential one--in mediating personal and cultural loss. We need forms to deal with the rupture and trauma that all loss brings. Such forms include the funeral rituals we perform with the death of a loved one or the political ceremonies that accompany a disaster or social catastrophe. Yet, the theatre provides a unique vehicle for an encounter with loss. For it is within a dramatic staging that both personal grief and social rupture may intersect, interact, and potentially integrate.

In this thesis, I will explore the claim that social trauma generates, perhaps even demands, theatrical response. Events within a culture that threaten the safety and security of everyday life and/or put into question how a society understands its' beliefs, values, and sense of a future, are alarming and overwhelming. Writers, actors, directors, producers, critics, and so on, are uniquely placed to attempt to address such tears in the fabric of the world. To further extrapolate the notion of social trauma, I will operate under the following definition throughout this thesis: "Social trauma is: (1) a trauma or wounding; (2) the trauma is shared by a group of people, rather than an individually experienced; (3) the trauma spans multiple generations, such that contemporary members of the affected group may experience trauma-related symptoms without having been present for the past traumatizing event(s)" (Mohatt et al. 128). In this sense, social trauma is a public narrative, one that "connects present-day experiences and circumstances to the trauma" and that is socially enacted and metabolized by the cultural surround (Mohatt et al. 128). It is my contention that in performative artistic forms, social trauma may function as an encompassing genre and as a container for historical and social complexities. It is this "bardic function"¹ that helps manage, transform, and transmit the trauma, which may or may not even be consciously known.

As Carlson noted about live performance, "Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records its attempts to understand its own operations" (Carlson 2). In this sense, drama is a socially embedded operation, tasked with

¹ John Fiske and John Hartley define the phrase "bardic television" in their famous, albeit dated, essay of the same title. For Fiske and Hartley, television as a medium *articulates*, *implicates*, *exposes* and *transmits* dominant cultural ideology. They trace seven functions that television performs to ensure a "successful communication takes place when the members of the audience 'negotiate' their response to these functions with reference to their own peculiar circumstances" (Fiske & Hartley 67).

responding to the currents of cultural life. We are all subject to the forces of history--some of us more or less protected than others and all of us more or less protected at a given point in time. Theatre is part of our navigation of the forces that lie beyond our control. Amongst these forces—social disruption, political violence, and historical traumas beg for a containing response.

Every technology (from the Greek *techne*, meaning art or craft) brings with it modes of storytelling. From Paleolithic cave walls, to Greek amphitheaters, to the Elizabethan stage, and onward towards radio, movies, television, and now a plethora of screens; it is my contention that storytelling and dramatic narrative are (among many other things) guiding forms of a culture's historical memory and collective mourning. As I go forward, I will explore what happened when televised drama took up this bardic and memorializing function. Turning to a number of live teleplays from the early 1950s that focused on social issues and cultural traumas, I will propose and identify a dramatic genre of response—the 'social trauma narrative'--emergent within the nascent television landscape.

Teleplays, often broadcast live, were central to the emergence of the new aesthetic and commodity forms that emerged with the birth of television. An hour in length, these live teleplays were part of a larger anthology series. The anthology, underwritten by a sponsor, was the equivalent of Elizabethan patronage. Corporations—such as Kraft, Westinghouse, Philco, United States Steel and Goodyear, to name just a few—worked with various advertising agencies, producers, and talent to create new episodes each week. Perhaps surprisingly, given the inherent profit motive of corporate benefactors, historical and political themes were central to these teleplays, including several that I will examine in my thesis; *Noon on Doomsday*, *Thunder on Sycamore Street*, and *The Strike*. These teleplays were powerful, innovative, and represented

the bare beginnings of a movement from a television built on strictly theatrical forms of presentation to a distinct and definable televisual style. These teleplays reflect back an uncertain America emerging from the fog of war as a new American ideal began to take shape.

To make clear my argument, I want to build a picture of a specific genre—the social trauma narrative—that arose in the era of the 1950s Golden Age of Television. Stephen Neale described the cinema as, “not simple an industry or a set of individual texts. Above all it is a social institution” (Neale 19). In Neale’s point of view, to define the social trauma genre it is necessary to find the ‘circulations,’ or ‘machinations’ between the structures of production (the television industry), the texts (in this case, the teleplays themselves), and the subject (the audience’s reception). Using Neale’s three categories as a thread, my claim will be that this first Golden Age of Television produced a specific genre located in a system of production that was shaped by several key forces: a) the ‘newness’ of the medium; b) the availability of playwrights who began to foster specifically televisual forms out of pre-existing theatrical and radio conventions; c) the temporal closeness of the second world war; d) the emergence into social contestation of issues involving race, ethnicity, and the potential for global mass destruction; as well as e) the enduring social process wherein ruptures in societal life demand a cultural response.

In the case of the social trauma genre, this particular managing, transforming, and transmitting is akin to Aristotle’s notion of catharsis. Translated in contemporary terms, catharsis can be interpreted psychoanalytically not as an abreaction or release, but rather a form of ‘holding’ (Winnicott), ‘containment’ (Bion), or ‘mentalization’ (Fonagy). In this latter sense, the social trauma genre does not only work through an identificatory connection with characters on stage that allows a heightened yet removed re-living, but rather we find a deep emotional process

where unprocessed, raw, and persecutory social impacts are given room to be named, shared, and potentially healed.

To help further set the scene, these teleplays emerged against the backdrop of political and cultural turmoil. These include:

- a. The aftermath of WWII, with 400,000 Americans dead and a world turned upside down.
- b. The emergence of the Holocaust as evidence of an annihilating impulse in Western civilization. Though history is full of genocidal currents—the American annihilation of many Indigenous peoples is one such example—the Holocaust cast an ashen shadow on post-war life.
- c. The threat of nuclear destruction and with it widespread anxiety about ‘the bomb.’
- d. The emergence of the civil rights movement in response to the trauma of American racism. The movement brought this trauma into the political arena – Brown v. Board of Education (1954), the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), and the murder of Emmett Till (1955).
- e. Finally, the division of the country with the paranoid witch-hunt for the “danger within”—cultivated by figures such as McCarthy, Nixon, etc.

Regarding the last point (e), the ‘Army-McCarthy hearings’ (April-June 1954) might be seen as a quintessential social trauma genre narrative: telecast live, with dramatic characters, actions, and tensions-- the spectacle of Joseph McCarthy being brought to heel by the U.S. Army counsel, Joseph Welch, appears in retrospect to have turned the tide against the fear and capitulation that had so traumatized cultural life in America in the first years after the war. Also, not to forget that Welch uttered the unforgettable dramatic line: “Senator, you've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?”

Ron Simon, in his excellent introduction to the Criterion Collection's *The Golden Age of Television*, writes that, "The present in the fifties was so complex and transformative that it required a new mode of expression to reveal the underlying changes" (Simon 9-10). A piece of my argument will take on the question of the social trauma teleplay's relation to American forms of memory. Henry Ford once noted that, "history is bunk." In the American landscape, memory is an elusive function; the new, the revolutionary, and the next best thing leave little room for the necessary conditions for memory and mourning. These teleplays were in many ways set against the grain of American forgetting. They spoke to an idea that 'we must not forget,' and that we should not paper over. In this sense they were revolutionary—not like the next laundry product which may well have sponsored the programs—but as a counter to the pulls toward historical erasure.

These teleplays were in a sense the news for the audience of the time. In the early 1950s people received the news from radios and newspapers, not television. The social trauma teleplays provided an emotional texture to newspaper headlines and radio updates, and were for many people a potent contextualization of the day's news. Indeed, TV news began to come of age alongside the social trauma genre, with figures such as Edward R. Murrow moving from radio to television and offering takes on history, current events, and in particular political troubles and crises.

However, the memorial function of the early social trauma teleplay proved elusive to sustain. As television evolved it became a medium of immediacy and pointed to the future more than the past. The economics of the medium propelled an environment in which selling the next best thing stood uneasily with keeping aflame the old and/or the disturbing. Why not just forget

and move on? Too much work, not enough profit, and politics (or things that seemed political) invited backlash and censorship.

By the early 1960s, the anthology series was disappearing as quickly as it arrived, leaving in its wake a changed dramatic form. Yet, social trauma didn't disappear from our culture. If we grant that narrative, art, and drama are essential to homo-sapiens approach to an unpredictable and often dangerous environment, then modern humans have no less need to find forms to contain our historical wounds, cultural anxieties, and social traumas. Like water finding its way to ground, trauma makes itself felt in some form—even in its absence.

The Freudian concepts of 'repression' and 'disavowal' describe the absent presence of unwanted thoughts or experiences. We rid ourselves of conscious awareness, of disturbing or threatening material, and yet we are still unconsciously tied to what we hoped was expelled. The repressed returns in disguised forms and the disavowed haunts us from afar. An examination of the western, the police procedural, medical dramas, family comedy, and other genres that became staples of television in the last decades of the 20th century could be seen as investigating their particular means of repressing/disavowing, as well as expressing the central anxieties of their time. Here I only wish to note that it took decades after the disappearance of the social trauma narrative teleplay for direct and undisguised portrayals of similar themes and concerns to return to the television landscape.

I find an echo of this analysis in James Baldwin's salient essay, "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist." The opening line reads as follows: "Someone once said to me that the people in general cannot bear very much reality" (Baldwin 373). For Baldwin, mass culture perpetuates an American myth, for what it really reflects "is the American bewilderment in the face of the world

we live in.” He goes further, in true Baldwin fashion, to drive his point home by revealing to us something fundamental about the way we understand ourselves. For Baldwin,

“We do not seem to want to know that we are in the world, that we are subject to the same catastrophes, vices, joys, follies which have baffled and afflicted mankind for ages. And this has everything to do, of course, with what was expected of America...[and] reveals in sum, something we do not want to know about ourselves.” (Baldwin 375)

Using Baldwin’s words as a guide, as I often do, I hope to illustrate the moments in the history of television when writers, artists, and producers repositioned us back *into* the world, revealing to us painful truths about race, about war and trauma, and about the way we imagine ourselves.

Contemporary Television and Theatrical Echoes

Much time and attention has been paid to writing about, naming, and understanding the current ‘renaissance’ of contemporary television. Many critics have declared today’s television as in yet another “Golden Age,” a term often used in reference to a cluster of television shows from the 1950s, including comedies, variety shows, and notably our dramatic social-trauma anthology shows. If contemporary television is indeed in a renaissance (or at its “peak” to borrow FX Networks President John Landgraf’s more anxious 2015 declaration)², then how might we understand the links between today’s ‘precious metal’ and the offerings of half a century ago?

We might first recall that the metaphor of a “Golden Age” is drawn from Greek Mythology and has been used to describe an initial period of harmony and security in the ‘ages of man.’ However, as history has illustrated, it always seems that our imagined Garden of Eden

² John Landgraf famously declared that, “There is too much television,” during an FX presentation at the summer Television Critics Association press tour. His comments came to be associated with the notion of ‘peak TV.’ <http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/tca-fx-networks-john-landgraf-wall-street-1201559191/>

inevitably suffers a fall and we are left to deal with the rubble. One function theatre and television serves is to provide stories to show us how we navigate our condition in our very 'un-golden' world.

At its birth, television was almost wholly reliant on two of the most prevalent forms of its time--the radio play and theatrical performance. Movies were not a feasible analogue for television at its inception given the technical limitations--principally the small screen, the poor visual optics, and the primitive state of recording technologies which did not allow the kind of editing so central to the lexicon of film. In terms of dramatic content, early-televised drama borrowed much from the theatre. Many of the early teleplays were actually theatrical adaptations, as playwrights were recruited to the new industry and styles of performance and staging adhered to old techniques of acting and stagecraft. The centrality of the writer in television was also borrowed from the theatre. TV writer Ernest Kinoy noted that: "The general practice in live television of this time was to accept the notion of the writer as the original instigator-creator of a particular play...This was picked up from Broadway, where the author is considered the man who has produced the work, who has done the thing which is going to be presented" (Qtd. In Boddy 88).

Raymond Williams argued in his seminal book *Television*, that TV is indebted to the theatre. For Williams, Ibsen and Strindberg predicted the birth of television, "With the coming of television...it was possible to transmit performances of an orthodox theatrical kind, and it could be argued that the television play was the ultimate realization of the original naturalist convention: the drama of the small enclosed room, in which a few characters lived out their private experience of an unseen public world" (Williams 52). Citing Ibsen's plays such as *Ghosts* and *When We Dead Awaken*, Williams maintains that the characters are "trapped between past

and future” with no means of escape for they have retreated into an “isolated room” (Williams 21-22). For Williams, this stasis mimics the immobility of the dark room in the family home where television was thought to live.

Williams goes even further, arguing that these playwrights predicted the rise of television by invoking what he calls a “flow of images,”

“It is significant that the most advanced drama in Europe in the 1890s - that of Strindberg moving towards *The Road to Damascus* and the Chamber plays – was employing dramatic means that were beyond the reproduction of an observed and static external reality. Indeed it is one of the most striking instances of the complicated relations between new forms of experience and new kinds of technology that Strindberg was experimenting with moving dramatic images in the same decade in which, in quite another environment, the pioneers of motion pictures were discovering some of the technical means that would eventually make this kind of dramatic imagery possible and in the end even commonplace. Strindberg was trying, against many of the limitations of the theater stage, to create – as in *Dreamplay* – a flow of images which would be capable of realizing some of the intense particular worlds seen under stress, in conflict, in personal isolation, in dream or in nightmare.” (Williams 53)

This sense of imagistic theatrical flow echoes in Williams’ assertion, that broadcasting depends upon a perpetual flow of channels, content, and style. For Williams, television was the natural evolution of the theatre. With this evolution (or revolution) our relationship to drama changed. Mass televised drama began socializing us to its tempos. The ritualized and cathartic act of ‘going to the theatre’ was now centralized in the family home via the television set. Raymond Williams names this the “dramatized society” (Williams 56). Today, in the decades since the birth of television, the dramatized society is all we know. In fact, one might even argue that we are living in a post-dramatized society—for we are no longer simply socialized to television’s rhythms but live by them and are in a sense created by them.

Theatre, and by extension any dramatic form, is made up of many interwoven elements—the script, the staging, the actors, and the audience. We might track the changes in each of these elements as they move from the theatre to the television screen—that is to say from script to teleplay, from stage to stage set, from theatre seats to living room couches, and from theatrical styles of acting to specific forms of television performance. Here, I am restricting my focus to examining a much narrower spectrum, though it appears wide enough on its own: an attempt to describe *both* the continuities and the discontinuities that evolved between theatrical and televisual forms in so far as they relate to the theme of social trauma.

In Anne Carson's beautiful brief essay, "Tragedy: A Curious Art Form" she gives voice to the 'reiterating' that theatre actors perform for us:

"They act for you. You sacrifice them to action. And this sacrifice is a mode of deepest intimacy of you with your own life. Within it you watch [yourself] act out the present or possible organization of your nature. You can be aware of your own awareness of this nature as you never are at the moment of experience. The actor, by reiterating you, sacrifices a moment of his own life in order to give you a story of yours." (Carson 7)

In Carson's interpretation, drama taps into our unconscious and provides us the opportunity to view ourselves outside of 'ourselves.' Of course, here she is emphasizing the classic genre of tragedy. The tragic mode as understood by Carson is a form of Aristotelian 'catharsis' not based on letting go or getting rid of, but rather by getting closer to an intimate truth.

Perhaps one of the defining discoveries of television was its power to increase the intimacy between actor and audience. In some ways this is a matter of the perceptual basis of each form. As Philip Seymour Hoffman said in an interview, sometimes you are in the audience of a play and you know it is being staged 'only for you.' However, this 'only for me' experience

seems amplified by forms--movies and television--that use the technical apparatus of the camera and the physical possibilities of editing.

The 'language of cinema' and particularly the 'dialect of television' have evolved in league with a capacity for dramatic intimacy. Perhaps this linguistic truth applies even more to television, for film has exploited its capacities to show life enlarged 'on the Big Screen', 'in Technicolor', 'with Dolby Sound' and '3-D' etc. While television has moved toward bigger screens and 'home theatre' environments, it still holds something essentially intimate—television provides its own close-up through its very movement from a theatre filled with strangers to a home with family, friends, or even only one's self.

CHAPTER ONE

Television History & Technology

Television's Inception

Watching a television programme, we feel not so much that we are being taken out into the world, as that the world is being brought to us.

- G Millerson, 1972

Television emerged on the heels of a world at war and a panicked America. Following the rapid development of radio as a mass form and new experimental visual technology, television was born at the edges of a worldwide calamity. Television emerged as America prepared for the coming war and spread once the war had ended, thus a mass-commodity culture was again viable. Just before television debuted nationally in 1939, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), which became a major player in the television field, became intertwined with America's war efforts. As Erik Barnouw explains, television and the RCA were suddenly intimately bound up with American foreign policy;

“...the Roosevelt administration was turning from domestic concerns to rearmament. Once more executives of major corporations—this time including RCA delegations, led by a diligent David Sarnoff—were back and forth to Washington to discuss military production needs. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Roosevelt proclaimed a limited national emergency, diverting strategic materials from domestic manufacture to war requirements. In production was a navy item closely related in technology to television, but with a name not yet to be spoken, even in a whisper—radar. RCA, child of the military, was suddenly in the midst of war production.” (Barnouw 89)

The idea of television being birthed out of America’s war efforts is not simply a metaphor. The structural conditions that gave birth to the medium were shaped by the war. The audience for the new era had been steeped in the nation’s total commitment to the war. And to add to the list, many of the anthology writers who would give life to the form were marked by their experiences in the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps as soldiers, sailors, and/or reporters.

To trace the history of American television is to tell many different histories of the nation. Whether we trace American history through the lens of technology, culture, or politics—television’s emergence shifted them all. Television debuted nationally at the opening of the New York World’s Fair in the form of a speech delivered by President Roosevelt. In his speech Roosevelt anticipated and alluded to the imagined ‘democratization’ of television, stating,

“The United States stands today as a completely homogeneous nation, similar in its civilization from Coast to Coast and from North to South, united in a common purpose to work for the greatest good of the greatest number, united in the desire to move forward to better things in the use of its great resources of nature and its even greater resources of intelligent, educated manhood and womanhood, and united in its desire to encourage peace and good will among all the nations of the earth” (Franklin Roosevelt 1939)

Roosevelt's notion of a "homogenous nation" stands as the perfect analogy for the dream of television networks, sponsors and broadcasters to come, all of which were ripe with the notion that television must represent (and sell to) an ideal and homogenized America.

In writing about the first broadcast, *The New York Times* reported that, "The scenes were *clearly* televised...the scenery and costumes were exactly as seen on the stage" adding that "the viewing's perfect, no audience's head to dodge, no latecomers to disturb the continuity" (Qtd. In Sturcken 9). Here television is directly juxtaposed to theatre. Coming off the excitement of the first national broadcast, television continued to expand across the country.

Despite all the activity, an "atmosphere of doom" began to cloud over these early experiments (Barnouw 92). The FCC allowed only "limited" commercial activity, meaning that stations could not sell time slots. When television went fully commercial two years later in 1941, schedules were reduced to four hours per week and many television stations went off the air. With only six television stations in operation on approximately 10,000 sets, television went almost entirely dark and didn't reemerge again until after the war. The promise and lure of the private moving picture was placed on the backburner.

When peace arrived 1945, television reemerged in force with wartime industries being freed up to produce picture tubes and other components of television sets. At the same time, the FCC resumed television licensing and by July 1946 had authorized twenty-four new stations. The year 1946 was a particularly transitional time, with television finally re-emergent as commercially viable medium. This shift spoke to a historical moment in which "the isolated nuclear family and its concerns eclipsed previous ethnic, class, and political forces as the crucible of personal identity" (Lipsitz 48). For George Lipsitz, television shaped that transition by "defining the good life in family-centric, asocial, and commodity-oriented ways" (Lipsitz 48).

However, the emerging anthology writers, inspired by the radio writers as well as by their experiences during the war, were not content to narrow their vision. They began to wrestle with what the medium of television could and could not set out to reflect and explore.

We may identify similar shifts in personal and family structure at work in the transition of theatrical to filmic forms. For instance, Raymond Williams noted that,

“The real key to Elizabethan theatre—to its fluidity and flexibility of essential form—is the social mobility of which the new dramatists were especially aware, in their own immediate histories...It has always seemed to me significant that so much of the history of film has been, in more sense than one, the history of the United States: then at least a wholly new kind of essentially mobile society...But it is also more than a physical mobility. A sense of historical movement—of class against class, of revolution and transformation—is quite evidently part of this world.” (Williams 23)

And for the film scholar Christian Metz the rise of cinema is linked to period of social life which “was strongly marked by the concept of the individual,” and which “belongs to the private man” (Qtd. In Cook 247).

From these perspectives, theatre is essentially about the collective body and the communal person, while television represents a whole new realm of the private. The live television drama is poised between these two realms. It seems fitting that in the social trauma teleplay there is almost invariably a public trial of some sort—a form still straddling the private and the public spheres, the theatrical collective and the filmic individual.

CHAPTER TWO

The Golden Age and the History of Live Television Drama

One of the first instances in which television was deemed to be in a so-called ‘Golden Age’ was the September 15, 1950 issue of *TV Guide*, which prophesied “The Dawn of TV’s Golden Age!” The world of radio along with its stars and writers were quickly shifting their sights onto television and people were taking notice. There was something about the ‘live-ness’ of these clusters of teleplays that captured audiences’ attention. Curator Ron Simon notes that what marked the teleplays of the first golden age of television was “not about a reverence for the past but an intense concern for the now.” (Simon 9-10).

Critics at the time invoked the Golden Age metaphor because of the innovative and experimental programming that showcased a wide range of emerging talent—actors, directors, and centrally, the writers themselves. According to Ron Simon, much of the excitement around the Golden Age was fueled by radio stars foray into television, “The aural of yesterday became the visual of today. Certainly the video presence of such multimedia stars as Jack Benny, Groucho Marx and Bob Hope gave the fledgling medium an instant popularity and respectability” (Simon 5).

This live-ness might also be represented as a shift from a “vaudevillian to a realist aesthetic (Thumin 14). The anthology series caught on to this aesthetic shift. The teleplays that I focus on in this thesis were very much alive and technically ‘live,’ and as such recordings of these teleplays, which began in 1946 and lasted until about 1960, are few and far between. Most have been forgotten and subsequently lost in the archives. Paddy Chayefsky’s *Marty* is perhaps the most widely remembered teleplay. Its persistence is no doubt helped by its adaptation into a feature film, which won the Academy Award for best picture in 1955.

In Gary Edgerton's book, *The Columbia History of Television* he argues against labeling the estimated two thousand live dramas of the 1950s and 60s as "Golden Age" dramas. For Edgerton believes that an "aura" was deliberately created to highlight the shows for consumer purposes only. He goes further when he argues that these dramas are comparable "rather than superior" to shows such as *Your Show of Shows*, *I Love Lucy*, *Tonight!*, *Gunsmoke*, and *Perry Mason* as "being the best early representatives of their respective genres" (Edgerton 194). However, he reduces and overlooks a crucial corner of the time period.

I. The First Period of Television

In William Hawes expansive book *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, he outlines the four periods of television drama (leaving out of course the new era of contemporary television we currently encompass). According to Hawes, this first period began in 1928 when a one act drama, *The Queen's Messenger*, premiered as the first 'show' broadcast from a station (to the few television set's that existed). The September 1928 broadcast took place just a few months after the first televised newscast on W2XAD, the signal owned by General Electric's WGY (today it's WRGB). *The Queen's Messenger* was a melodrama written by J. Hartley Manners and was shot on multiple cameras. Chosen for its small cast of two actors (and perhaps for its spy storyline, which spoke to the anxiety of the period), *The Queen's Messenger* was "stylistically primitive" (Edgerton 35). These early plays "relied exclusively on close-ups of the male and female leads, interspersed with simple cutaways showing mostly hand gestures coupled with dramatic manipulations before the camera of various props, including wine glasses, keys, and a revolver." (Edgerton 35).

This first broadcast is yet another example of how heavily television borrowed from the theatre. We can also look to the first British television broadcast as another early theatrical adaptation. BBC radio producer Lance Sieveking brought Pirandello's *L'Uomo dal Fiore in Bocca* (1923) to TV as *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth*, which aired on July 14th 1930. While the program was not particularly ambitious it garnered positive reviews and the public's awareness of television increased markedly.

For Hawes, this period of television history lasted until 1947, which marked the arrival of the first anthology series--*The Kraft Television Theatre*. It was the first regularly scheduled drama anthology on live television and would become the longest running. Over the course of its eleven-year run, from 1947 to 1958, the anthology series produced 650 scripts and 52 productions a year. The demands were abundant. As the writer Abraham Polonsky highlights, "live television is a form that makes great demands on the people who make it. You write dialogue a bit differently, because you can't rehearse it as often...And very complicated things get to be difficult to do, whereas in film nothing's too complicated" (Stempel 33).

II. The Golden Age Anthology Series

Because of the complexities of pulling together productions with very little time, *Kraft Television Theatre* produced far more adaptations than original television plays. For the most part the limitations of the form presented themselves physically. For example many of the productions were set in only one location so as to mitigate cost and time. However, the subject matter itself was also constrained, adventurous shows were frowned upon. Talent agent Ed Rice told TV Guide that "we can deal with any subject but it must be about people you believe in and not case subjects from a psychiatrist's notebook. We look for matinee-type plays—believable

incidents that might happen to people who live down the street from our viewers” (Qtd. In Stempel 35). Rice’s reflection seems a long way off from the Walter White’s (*Breaking Bad*) and King Joffrey’s (*Game of Thrones*) of contemporary television.

The adaptations, while easier to pull off, did not last forever. By 1952, the series turned its’ focus to character studies and in 1953 the show started producing what has been called ‘slice of life’ plays. While *Kraft Television Theatre* set the stage for the rise of the live anthology show, *Philco Television Playhouse* and *The Goodyear TV Playhouse*, both produced by the trailblazer Fred Coe, ushered in the centrality of the writer and the bulk of the golden age anthologies.

Fred Coe, often associated with the live television form, was trained in the theatre and in 1948 he produced a season of classic play adaptations on *Philco Television Playhouse*. Yet Coe quickly set out to change the adaptation formula by bringing in writers who would pitch original ideas. It was in this period that the writer became a central force of the teleplay, much like the television “auteurs” of today (such as David Chase, Jill Soloway, and David Milch). Gordon Duff, another producer from the period, reflects that at *Philco*, “...we kept the writer around to help cast the show, he’d sit in with us on the meetings with the set designer, and we always wanted him around during rehearsals, so that he could make the necessary changes. There was a lot of give-and-take around the office—and it was healthy. Always creative” (Qtd. In Wilk 129).

Coe “collected” writers—from Tad Mosel to Paddy Chayefsky to Horton Foote. Tad Mosel described him as “the first man to raise the writer to a position of importance in television, and to a writer he is a combined father, friend, buffer, psychiatrist, and newspaper critic” (Qtd. In Sturcken 82). Horton Foote remarked that Coe “had the courage to do” his plays (Qtd. In Stempel 46). For Chayefsky, television was more conducive to his writing than the theatre, “I

was able to concentrate the action of my story on the people directly involved. I was even able to catch more literal reality than I could have caught in a stage play” (Qtd. In Stempel 49).

It was at *The Goodyear Television Playhouse* that arguably the most famous golden age teleplay was broadcast. *Marty*, Chayefsky’s magnanimous teleplay was first broadcast on May 24, 1953 and focused on a thirty-five year old butcher, Marty Piletti, in an “untouched” moment of life where he meets a young woman at a dance hall. With the arrival of *Marty*, Chayefsky tapped into something in the American cultural and historical consciousness.

The story reflected the existential angst of a man whose life seemed destined to remain small, lonely and cloistered. Fate opens the possibility of a shared journey with a young woman in a similar state. Doubt fueled by aggressive friends and a Freudian caricature of a clinging mother, Marty almost loses his chance. The poignancy of *Marty* draws upon ‘universal’ themes about the limits that may bound a life. The claustrophobic atmosphere of family, class, and culture is captured as well, a radical departure from the usual idealizations. Perhaps *Marty* also carries a reminder that despite the utopian promises of a shiny, rich, commoditized American future, people still live lives in their own quiet corners of the world. Tennessee Williams covered similar terrain in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), where the birth of a new world for the narrator Tom means leaving behind a fading, decaying, and impoverished past. Echoes of the Great Depression reverberate through both dramas, and the wounds of the war may be found in their sad and somber crevices.

Alongside *The Goodyear Television Playhouse* and *Kraft Television Playhouse*, similar anthology series were also booming. *Studio One* on CBS was originally a radio drama program that began in 1947. It was first brought to television under the producer Worthington Miner’s watch and introduced the soon to be influential writer Reginald Rose to the public. In 1948, there

were about 100,000 television sets in America, with two-thirds of those in New York City. By 1950, 6 million sets, representing 9% of the country had joined the viewing audience, and by 1955 65% of American families, or 30 million people owned their own television set.³

As the audience and output of television production rapidly increased, the locus of the television world started to shift west toward California. Perhaps the best known of the anthology series is *Playhouse 90*, which was produced by CBS in 1956 at Hollywood Television City. West Coast or East Coast however, the dramatic goals appeared the same. The series' first producer, Martin Manulis, said that the impulse behind the show was to "bring theatre into the home." *Playhouse 90* was produced by many of TV's legends (John Houseman, Herbert Brodtkin, and Fred Coe) and was thus able to poach some of the best literary talent (Tad Mosel, Robert Alan Arthur, Horton Foote, Reginald Rose, and Rod Serling). While the first season of *Playhouse 90* was filmed live, by the beginning of the second season, the producers were filming shows to help mitigate the pressures of doing a live show every week.

The anthology shows were marked in many ways by what they were not. They deviated from the mainstream television shows of the period. For example, this was a period of time that saw the rise of the situation comedy (between the years of 1947 and the mid-1950s). The first of which was the sitcom, *Mary Kay and Johnny*, which premiered on November 18, 1947 for *Dumont*. The action "revolv[ed] around Mary Kay, a good-natured screwball who wreaks havoc on her domestic surroundings, only to be rescued each week by her much more stable spouse, thus reflecting a generic formula common to radio sitcoms" (Edgerton 130). This show gave rise to others, *The Goldbergs* (1949-1954), *Mama* (1949-1956), *Life of Riley* (1949-1950, 1953-1958), and *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956).

³ From, *Television History – The First 75 Years*. <http://www.tvhistory.tv/facts-stats.htm>

Still, cultural anxieties may be assuaged but not erased. Even softer edged anthology teleplays, ones that “...drew themes from the prewar years,” still managed to make room for grappling with the “uncertainties of the atomic age [which] hovered over the country, the draft was still going on and would gain momentum as the Korean conflict approached and the postwar economy was unstable” (Hawes 146).

III. Post-Golden Age Television

By the dawn of the 1960's the pull of talent to television began to recede and the new medium began to lose writers, producers, and actors to the film industry. While the viewership of televised programs kept getting stronger, the medium's more creative material seemed to wane in favor of boilerplate predictable fare. As Hawes highlights,

“Middle class angst, common folks with strong personalities, characters involved in familiar problem-solving situations, actors who lives on camera and off seemed like welcome neighbors, stunning or clever commercial messages that sold ordinary products or services as solutions to viewers' problems, imagined or real, were the stuff of television drams.” (Hawes 2)

Movies began to (or returned to) an exploration of the deeper layers of the human condition, and by the late 60's a veritable explosion of cutting edge productions emerged. Mark Harris described this shift in his study of five movies—*Bonnie and Clyde*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *Guess Whose Coming to Dinner*, *The Graduate*, and even *Doctor Doolittle*, that marked the emergence of a new Hollywood. While this list is clearly somewhat arbitrary—another might easily be drawn—the essential point was that film was once again the premier vehicle for innovation and cultural commentary.

However, the world does not stand still and by the 1970's television began to make room for more sophisticated and challenging work. Returning to Hawes once again, he described the years between 1975-1990 as “a period noted for its (television) acceptance of the human condition in facets of misery and glory, gowned and naked, with or without excuses” (Hawes 3). Productions such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *All in the Family*, and *M*A*S*H*, were followed by grittier work such as *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*. It appears that proclaiming the signifier ‘Golden Age’ is irresistible, and the emergence of shows that risked previously censored themes—a successful single woman; a reactionary main character used to highlight social ills; war as a site of alienation and carnage not just idealized sacrifice; police work or medical settings portrayed not simply as ennobling, but as complex and flawed—has influenced critics to speak of a second golden age.

Whether golden or tarnished, it seems clear that a boldness had returned to television. The auteur had also re-appeared as specific writers, producers, and showrunners began to be identifiable as harbingers of thoughtfulness and creative edged work (MTM enterprises produced several of these productions and writers like Norman Lear (*All in the Family*), Steven Bochco (*Hill Street Blues*), and Larry Gelbart (*M*A*S*H*) remind us of the leading role of writers during the first golden age).

Radio's Influence

To get a fuller understanding of these historical permutations, it will help to go back to the beginning, well, at least to the beginning of the technological revolution in storytelling that radio represented. Radio set the stage for the experiments of the 1950s anthology writers. Like the anthology writers, many radio dramatists looked on in horror and dismay as the Great

Depression ravaged the nation and as the winds of disruption and war built up during the 1930s. Radio became a central artistic means to explore the cultural anxieties of the age—Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* most famously tapped into the country’s brittle and easily overturned sense of security.

One of the striking aspects of the arts is how cultural innovation so often depends upon existing institutions that represent the powers that be. Revolutionary artists often needed wealthy patrons, and innovative radio relied on the sponsorship of the corporate radio networks. The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) was particularly devoted to fostering the experiments of these radio dramatists. In the 1930s, CBS utilized unsold time in its schedule by dedicating it to experimental, unsponsored programming as a way of competing with its rival NBC. This allowed room for many of radio’s legends both in news and drama to experiment without fear of retribution. Some examples of work that emerged from this include Corwin’s *They Fly Through the Air*, MacLeish’s *The Fall of the City*, and Welles’ *War of the Worlds*.

Radio tested the waters about what could be possible on television. As Neil Verma expands in his book *The Theatre of the Mind*, in the decade before the emergence of television “radio dramatists confronted the caprices of their medium, invented ways to guide listeners in stories, and also spoke to upheavals precipitated by hardship and war, three simultaneous errands that involved a suite of over determined questions about relationships, suggestion, and interiority” (Verma 3). Not only did radio provide a forge for the anthology writer’s creative toolkit, but radio dramatists helped open ways of thinking, feeling, and listening, that allowed a mass audience to confront the complexities of human experience.

For many of the anthology writers Norman Corwin, often referred to the “poet laureate” of radio, was a father figure for the nascent televisual form. Corwin wore a multitude of titles. In

Neil Verma's second book *The Anatomy of Sound: Norman Corwin and Media Authorship*, he describes Corwin as, "a poet who wrote journalism, a screenwriter and a librettist, a teleplay writer who wrote like a stage dramatist, and a pioneer of live radio who learned to use recording media. He was an author of media *in the plural* during a time in which those media were undergoing profound transformations" (Smith & Verma 5). Clearly, Corwin was able to reach across mediums and genres, creating a distinctive voice that championed an engagement with the social issues of his time.

Born in Boston in 1910, Corwin began his career as a newspaper journalist but quickly transferred to the radio slot. His first original radio play was *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*, which premiered in 1938. A rhymed radio drama, the play captured the attention of Edward R. Murrow for its adroit use of language. His next play, *They Fly Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*, was inspired by Mussolini's horrifying comments about the beauty of dropping bombs on Ethiopians. An exquisite, poetic exploration of the toll war takes on fighter pilots (and by implication the victims) this radio drama earned Corwin even more attention from the higher ups at the networks. In the drama, Corwin beautifully navigates the metrical form. Below he writes about the world below as seen by a pilot:

"Radioman: Nice symmetrical pattern, isn't it?

Narrator: It is. It is

A symmetry of unborn generations

Of canceled seed.

The dead below, spread fanlike in their blood,

Will bear no more.

The pattern is symmetrical indeed—

Of ciphers linked, repeating down infinity./

How can we justly celebrate the odysseys

Of demigods who finger destinies upon their

Trigger tips?”

Corwin utilized what Verma calls a “kaleidosonic narrative mode,” which “describe[s] the feeling of a shifting sonic world that is accessed through a central point that is itself static and removed from events” (Verma 68). Verma elucidates this further by comparing intimate plays to kaleidosonic ones:

“In intimate plays, our position follows alongside a character, whose place in the fictional world shapes content as we move in three spatial axes. Such plays offer scenic and emotional depth. Kaleidosonic plays leap from one mike to another, “objectively” arraying the world before us, with everything equidistant and accessed across just two dimensions.” (Verma 68)

Corwin was a master at this as he was able to do both.

In his famous radio play, *On a Note of Triumph*, he is able to tie vastly different worlds together. Verma describes the play below,

“In the space of just four minutes, we hear a song of Hitler’s death, along with versions of that song vocalized by the Serbs, Danes, and Greeks; then come expressions of relief at the fall of Berlin from a mother in Mississippi and a wife in Bridgeport; next we hear a New Hampshire congregation, a rabbi in Oklahoma, and a bishop in a cathedral changing to God; then there are crowds in Times Square, Piccadilly, and Nevsky Prospect. After that kaleidosonic sequence, the narrator takes us up into the stratosphere in search of a faint whisper behind the celebratory din, “a modest voice, as sensible and intimate to you as the quiet turning of your own considered judgment.” Eventually, we come to an ordinary GI overseas: “This boy, that boy, any boy at all with war still thumping in his ears,” who speaks to us first as an intimate individual asking questions about the victory.” (Smith & Verma 47)

Corwin's adept ability to sonically collage might be seen as a precursor to the experiments the anthology writers would take up five years later. By drawing upon the collective reservoir of memory, Corwin taught the anthology writers about holding and illustrating multiple layers of meaning to the audience – tapping into and linking the personal with the political and the intimate realm with the collective body.

For some scholars, the anthology writer's never reached the pinnacle of the radio plays. For the television scholar H.H. Anniah Gowda,

“Television plays, following in the turgid wake of noisy radio drama, occasionally celebrate the heroism of battlefields, foul with the sickening odour of blood, but they have not to date presented senatorial debate or the oratory of dictators, sick with the fouler odour of decadent mind and soul. In this choice they admittedly shun our most colossal problems and most monstrous sins. In the expression of our political imagination, such as it is, the stage, as represented, for example, by Lillian Hellman, had at least more to its credit than the television drama or even than the motion pictures; most emphatically, the radio drama had at times dealt with these larger moral issues to comparative advantage.” (Gowda 107)

Despite Gowda's skepticism about the moral complexities of the television anthologies, Corwin and radio drama left a discernable imprint reflected in the new medium's willingness to tackle themes with social, ethical, and political depth. Rod Serling, Reginald Rose, and Paddy Chayefsky have all cited Corwin as an influence on their own writing. Serling even named the protagonist of his *Twilight Zone* episode *The Night of the Meek* after Corwin.

Like the social trauma genre writers of the television anthology dramas, Corwin was unafraid to tackle politics, race, and war. And similar to Serling, he faced significant backlash for his political efforts, eventually leaving radio altogether in 1955. In reflecting on his departure from the medium, Corwin believes he was “graylisted,” telling the interviewer Douglas Bell in

1986 that, “the main impact was on my spirit. I grieved for America.” Serling, Rose, Chayefsky, Lumet, and Frankenheimer turned their own grief and worried spirits into a productive enterprise—the fashioning of a new form of engaged drama, this time available right from your living room’s television set.

The Theory of the Live

As I’ve outlined, from 1949 to 1955, almost all teleplays were broadcast live. Their liveness was essential to their cultural potency. Speaking to their power, the critic Gilbert Seldes noted that, “The tension that suffuses the atmosphere of a live production is a special thing to which audiences respond; they feel that what they see and hear is happening in the present and therefore more real than anything taken and cut and dried, which has the feel of the past” (Seldes Qtd. In Simon 7).

The live broadcast of teleplays represents a ‘liminal’ space situated between theatre and film. For Thorburn, “[television] is uniquely hospitable to the spatial confinements of the theatre and to the profound realistic intimacy of the film” (Thorburn 603). In Pam Cook’s superb *The Cinema Book* she writes about theories of the gaze, which we can undoubtedly tie to both mediums. Citing French film scholar Christian Metz, Cook summarizes the difference between the theatrical and the filmic gaze:

“The performance of a play deliberately sets out to be a collective experience, an event which acknowledges the gathered populace implicitly or indeed sometimes even explicitly, as in direct asides to the audience. Thus ‘actor and spectator are present to each other...(in) a ceremony which has a certain civic quality, engaging more than the private man’. Film, by contrast, ‘is exhibitionistic...[it] knows that it is being looked at and does not know...All the viewer requires – but he requires it absolutely – is that the

actor should behave as though he is not being seen, and so cannot see him, the voyeur.’”
(Metz Qtd. In Cook 247)

Live teleplays, while still transmitted across the distance of film, allowed for a theoretical recognition between audience and viewer.

New York Times Magazine critic Jack Gould alluded to this in a review, when he wrote that, “[television] removes from an audience’s consciousness the factors of time and distance...Live television...bridges the gap instantly and unites the individual at home with the event afar. The viewer has the chance to be in two places at once. Physically, he may be at his own hearthside but intellectually, and above all, emotionally, he is at the cameraman’s side” (Gould). For Gould the most crucial aspect of the new form was that, “both the player in the studios and the audience at home have an intrinsic awareness of being in each other’s presence” (Gould, “Live TV vs. Canned” *New York Times Magazine*). This allows for a collective catharsis, similar to theatre.

The social trauma teleplay utilizes ‘the live’ to its advantage. For one, the collective presence allows the audience to identify with the characters more fully as though they were in the theatre with the actors themselves. However on the flip side, Stanley Cavell makes the argument that live television does not actually reveal, but instead conceals, “...in live television what is present to us while it is happening is not the world, but an event standing out from the world. Its point is not to reveal, but to cover (as with a gun), to keep something on view” (Cavell 26). So can we have it both ways--‘live-ness’ as revelation *and* as concealment? In this case (unlike with cake) I believe so, for dramatic productions may always be moving between identification and distancing.

Coupled with the ‘potency of the live,’ the early television narratives could draw upon the restriction of broadcasting only in black and white. Though television didn’t offer the technical beauty of film’s finely grained black and white (and with it the expressive shadings of film noir and expressionism)—the ‘colorless’ nature of the teleplays may have enhanced the sense of providing a witness to history. The starkness of black and white implied seriousness and demanded a specific kind of attention. While the teleplays lived in the space of the black and white, its’ writers worked to create imaginative productions that would transcend simple oppositions.

Technically and structurally, teleplay storylines were always broadcast in continuity (like the theatre), as it was impossible to cut and splice shots. As summarized in a chapter on live television from the book *Watching What We Watch*,

“To vary the shots in a given scene, multiple cameras (usually three) were employed...The two close-up cameras were tightly cropped to avoid inadvertently showing the other cameras. This approach tended to favor close-ups with uncomplicated, out-of-focus backgrounds so that characters could be easily “read” on the small television screens in use at the time, and this format is still used in the productions of daytime soaps and some prime-time sitcoms” (Quoted in Davis, 116).

As it happens, the close up works to capture the idiosyncrasies and nuances of the human face and thereby fosters the audience’s identification with the characters.

When drama takes up social trauma as its theme the ‘bi-modal’ structure of ‘easily read’ and ‘out of focus’ may be particularly useful. We can take only so much reality before we need to retreat. The process of mourning described by Freud in his *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), involves a to and fro of contact with the emotional turmoil of loss. We process grief in fits and starts, turning towards an acceptance of hurt, loss, and letting go, before once again retreating to

quieter ground. The social trauma narrative allows the spectator to move back and forth with the scenes unfolding before them—up close and live, and then safely at a distance. ‘Live’ must encompass both sides.

CHAPTER THREE **Theories of Television**

Culture, seems to me the very element of consumer society itself; no society has ever been saturated with signs and messages like this one...everything is mediated by culture to the point when even the political and the ideological ‘levels’ have initially to be disentangled from their primary mode of representation which is cultural.

– Frederic Jameson

Television is intrinsically intertwined with culture and the formation of culture. Utilizing James Carey’s ‘ritual model of communication’ as well as anthropologist Victor Turner’s theory of ‘liminality,’ Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch locate television “as a site for society’s symbolic acting out of its self-understanding” (Qtd. In Saenz 42). Like the theatre, which reenacts stories of ourselves through repetition and identification, Newcomb and Hirsch argue that television functions similarly by drawing upon our reservoirs of social knowledge.

Television viewing is a “blend of ritual, aesthetic, literary, poetic and rhetorical practices” that relies on the power of the gaze (Dahlgren 42). However, because we are rarely drawn to acknowledge our own sense of viewing, which the theatre affords us, television often reinforces rather than challenges. As television scholar Richard Silverstone notes, mainstream television has the ability to “translate the unfamiliar and to provide frameworks for making sense of the unintelligible” and while it “articulates difference” it also “preserves difference” (Dahlgren 43).

Central to comprehending television theoretically is the form's intimate relationship to consumerism. Only in the last decade have we been afforded the ability to watch television without advertising. For Peter Dahlgren television "privilege[s] the subject position of 'consumer' over that of 'citizen'" and the social trauma dramas are no exception (Dahlgren 44). While the writer's themselves may not have explicitly privileged audience's consumer identity, the sponsors of the shows certainly did. The content of the shows were very often at odds with the advertisements.

Stephen Heath takes another position all together in regards to the audience as consumer vs. audience as citizen dichotomy. For Heath, democracy is inherently included in what gets shown on television, "which is itself the democratic medium of the transmission of the social multiplicity and its freedom" (Heath 282). For the social trauma dramas, justice is conjured by the end of the teleplay in a public display of democracy, often via a trial. Democracy is ritually enacted through the drama.

Stephen Heath has aptly written about the all-encompassing term *television* and what it covers. The television of today is certainly not the same as the television of the 1950s and 60s. For Heath, television is about messages, "that it communicates, that it identifies in order to engage us...television as a multiplication of messages through the whole range of programs and genres and slots with their various topics, narratives, dramas, constructions, strategies, all their diverse modes of presentation" (Heath 269). What are the various messages that the anthology writers of the 1950s were conveying to audiences?

To turn to linguistics, it is fitting that films are often referred to as moving pictures while the anthology dramas are referred to as teleplays. Susan Sontag also notices the linguistic differences between films and theatre, "it is apt that films came to be known popularly as moving

pictures rather than as “photoplays” or “screen plays.” Movies derive less from the theatre, from a performance art, an art that already moves, than they do from works of art which were stationary” (Sontag 27). As I have already suggested, television represents the middle ground between the two.

Genre Studies

I will utilize genre theory to make a larger case about the cultural pressures and structures within which social trauma teleplays resided. Genre itself provides a robust structure in its very coherence. Perhaps we can accept the travails of our external and internal worlds (i.e. allow ourselves to be moved, upset, and overturned) only if we have some familiar envelope that provides a semblance of continuity and cohesiveness. Genre provides exactly that framing structure.

Warshow looks at genre from the perspective of how genre expresses “history and ideology” (Warshow 61). He argues that all forms of genre hold hidden levels of social meaning—for instance, the gangster film seems to offer a resolution whereby law eventually restores a sense of the world’s disorder. At the same time, at another level the gangster genre represents an embrace of the revolt against order. Order and disorder are structural categories that are not confined to struggles with criminality. Indeed one might argue that all social upheaval is a form of disorder, and in a sense all social upheavals are therefore crimes against order and social coherence. Almost any genre one can imagine may play with the problematic “order/disorder” dichotomy--the Western, The Family Melodrama, the Screwball Comedy, and the Political Thriller may all turn on a narrative wherein order is upended and then restored (and potentially multiple times).

Warshow notes that within mass culture there always exists a “current of opposition, seeking to express by whatever means are available to it that sense of desperation and inevitable failure which optimism itself helps to create” (Warshow 99). While he argues that this current often comes forth in ‘mob politics’ or ‘journalism,’ it can also be found in the sphere of art. For Warshow (and to return to the gangster film once more), crime and gangster genre cuts through other artistic expressions like jazz or the “harmless nihilism of the Marx Brothers,” which disguise or attenuate the threads of opposition. He closes his essay by summarizing how the gangster genre subverts mainstream American “optimism”:

“[In the gangster film]...one is *punished* for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is—ultimately—impossible. The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the person of the gangster and resolve it by his death. The dilemma is resolved because it is *his* death, not ours. We are safe; for the moment, we can acquiesce in our failure, we can choose to fail.”
(Warshow 103)

We can see the complexity of ideas, ideologies, and imagination possible in any genre. The social trauma narrative is no different. The teleplays I discuss form a genre that offers its own take on the structure of order/disorder. Something violent, catastrophic, transgressive, or morally bankrupt has interrupted the communal sphere. The social trauma narrative is an attempt to face this rupture head on, without varnish or disguise, and it is here that its utopian dimension arises. By facing up to the truth, however painful, the possibility of mourning and repair arises—this is the optimism and promise of these sometimes searing narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ideology: The Teleplays

Paint the scream, not the horror.
- Francis Bacon

Television is a storehouse for the culture at large. As Michael Saenz notes, television viewing, “draws on and articulates viewers’ store of implicit social knowledge” (Saenz 39). Because of the sheer number of people that television reaches, along with the personal space of home that it occupies, television is fundamentally intertwined with cultural formation. In Saenz’s words, “[Television] offers socially prominent, narrative and rhetorical touchstones which (much like religion) coordinate the specific historicity of its viewers, without determining their entire way of life. It is an ideological hegemonic, narrational intervention—but a partial and ambiguous, hardly total one” (Saenz 42). Much like Julia Kristeva’s notion of “intertextuality,” Saenz argues that we view television through a bricolage of experiences and histories, not as a self-contained system of meaning.

In an unpublished chapter of his book, Horace Newcomb suggests that, “all television is melodrama” (Newcomb 19). Melodrama may be defined as a class or category that involves the ‘passions.’ In addition to the association of melodrama with the so-called ‘woman’s film’ or romantic drama, the melodramatic may include any sort of production as long as it carries a certain ‘style,’ namely an aesthetic of excess, pathos, and desire. However, style doesn’t account for the structural characteristics of melodrama. Theorists such as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1977), Thomas Elsaesser (1972), Chuck Kleinhans (1978), and Laura Mulvey (1977) have articulated various accounts of the social and/or psychological roots of the melodramatic. For my purposes, Elsaesser’s articulation of melodrama is compelling as he describes melodrama’s capacities to “give access to truths about human existence denied to more culturally respectable forms” (Qtd.

In Cook 74). He goes further to claim that melodrama is uniquely suited to make individual conflicts represent wider social currents. The social trauma genre employs melodramatic styles and forms wherein excess, pathos, and desire are embedded in the surface of the ostensibly historical narrative.

To build off Newcomb's point, melodrama is a uniquely modern phenomenon. As Peter Brooks explains, "It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern" (Brooks 15). The social trauma teleplays squarely fit into Brooks' narrative of the melodramatic historical mode. Brooks goes further by linking melodrama to the moral;

"Melodrama is indeed, typically, not only a moralistic drama but the drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to "prove" the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men...Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue." (Brooks 20)

Unlike the modern melodramas of television, the teleplays from the golden age period offered a kind of melodramatic antidote to the sub-genres of melodrama today.

Peter Brooks writes, "If modern mass entertainment is so dominated by a limited number of fixed sub-genres—police story, western, hospital drama—it is because these offer the clearest possible repertoires of melodramatic conflict. They provide an easy identification of villains and heroes (who can often be recognized simply by uniform), of menace and salvation" (Brooks 204). The teleplays of the 1950s were more complicated than this, though they didn't simply

allow the viewer to be carried along by predictable cycles of tension and resolution that the usual suspects of sub-genres pleasingly allowed. Instead, by tackling difficult subjects directly, the social trauma narratives expected more from the viewer. Rather than viewing these teleplays as simply another form of the melodramatic, it might be more useful to see them placed somewhere between tragedy and melodrama. To return once more to Thorburn, “melodrama is always in conflict with itself, gesturing simultaneously toward ordinary reality *and* toward a moral and emotional heightening that is rarely encountered in the “real” world (Thorburn 603).

The Personal is Political

Rod Serling remarked that, “The key to television drama is intimacy. The facial study on a small screen carries with it a meaning and power far beyond its usage in motion pictures.” For television, the face is the focus just as the stories themselves are intimate and personal in scope. The television scholar Gowda has written to Serling’s point about intimacy, but for him the personal detracts from political implications, “It is our misfortune that the private life has thus far in the twentieth century presented more material than has actually fructified in sincere art than has the public life; Freud has to date in all fields nourished better art than Marx. That the television drama exploits the psychological or personal above the political is in some respects at least to its temporary advantage or strategic convenience” (Gowda 107).

The personal thread of the anthology drama is most visible in Paddy Chayefsky’s teleplays. Chayefsky has said of his famous *Marty* that he “tried to write the dialogue as if it had been wire-tapped.” While Chayefsky’s teleplays are not the central focus of this thesis and do not contribute directly to the social trauma genre, his teleplays carve out their own specific political niche. By focusing on the ‘wire tapped dialogue,’ smaller stories about the Marty’s of the world,

and “the inadequacies of human communication” (Simon 15), Chayefsky reveals that meaning can be found in the smallest of stories,

“In television there is practically nothing too subtle or delicate that you cannot examine with your camera. The camera allows us a degree of intimacy that can never be achieved on stage. Realism in the theatre is a stylized business; what one achieves is really the effect of realism. In television, you can be literally and freely real...The writer has a whole new, untouched area of drama in which to poke about. He can write about the simplest things, the smallest incidents, as long as they have dramatic significance.” (Chayefsky 45).

Method acting was the name of the game for actors of the 1950s. The psychological was valued more than the physical for the actors and the live television medium itself. To borrow from script editor Ann Howard Bailey in 1953, “The television camera can serve as the scalpel with which to lay bare the human heart and spirit” (Qtd. In Boddy 81).

In Julia M. V Browning’s 2015 dissertation *Playing Inside the Box: Method Acting in Live Television Anthology Drama, 1947-1958*, she claims that Method acting within live television anthology dramas spoke to a wider America emerging into its post-war identity. The three (method acting, live television and anthology shows) taken together Browning claims, “dismantled boundaries between artistry, prestige, and commercialism; it was well positioned to retail the ‘American Way of Life’ to postwar Audiences” (Browning 160).

On a theoretical level, the personal aspect of television is amplified by its symbolic location inside the family home. Beverle Houston invents the notion of the “symbolic other” when she writes that, “The representative of the symbolic order (the Other) which hails the infant being into subjectivity has been partially replaced by TV...Situated and always delivering its discourse in the home...the television becomes a participant in the family drama. Its magic enunciation – at

once diffuse, source less, but directly demanding – intervenes in the process of identification and accession to Law by which the subject comes to recognize its position in culture” (Houston). In other words, television is a kind of family member.

The Social Trauma Genre

The anthology writers were encouraged to experiment with the television form and a group of these writers, many Jewish men from New York, pushed television to a political scope one could have never imagined in 1950s America. Some examples of the political works include, Worthington Miner’s adaptation of *Julius Caesar* (1949) which tackled Cold War anxieties about revolution and totalitarianism; Reginald Rose’s *Remarkable Incident at Carson Corners* (1953) which exposed a town’s complicity in the death of a school child; *The Gathering* (1953) another teleplay written by Reginald Rose about the Atomic Age through the lens of a terrified Moscow family; as well as *Trial at Nuremberg* (1956) which focused on the horrors of the gas chamber.

1955 was a crucial year for television’s early beginnings. In *The Image Empire*, Erik Barnouw wrote that it was during that year that “sponsors and their agencies began to demand drastic revisions and take control of script problems” (34). With a “revulsion against ‘down’ setting and people...advertisers were beginning to feel uneasy about political implications...some writers kept edging into dangerous areas” (Barnouw 34).

Once such ‘dangerous area’ is the issue of race in America. Here the social trauma narratives were up against a tremendous resistance in the new medium to tackle what was perceived as a thorny and divisive subject. Television’s relationship to race at this time was particularly horrifying and was perhaps the most racially segregated of all mass media forms. As Erik Barnouw notes in *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-*

1953, “Radio had been close to lily-white, but implicitly. Television was explicitly and glaringly white. A seeming mirror of the world, it told the Negro continually that he did not exist except in “insults” like Amos ‘n’ Andy” (Barnouw 297). The social trauma narrative writers would seek to challenge this racism. Yet, the resistance of the ‘powers that be’ proved nearly impossible to overcome. As the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans moved to the forefront of cultural awareness, television lagged far, far behind.

The interrelation of race, ethnicity, religion and even regionality in television drama is a fascinating subject that extends beyond the boundaries of this thesis. However, we might cursorily note that a kind of ‘transposition’ or ‘substitution’ was often deployed where one ethnic group’s story could stand-in for another. Sometimes this ‘standing-in’ allowed themes that would otherwise be censored to find expression—as in depicting a foreigner as a substitute for a black man or a Jew. At other times, such transposition would effectively erase the specific traumas of a particular group. Every social trauma has commonalities with others, and yet, it remains powerfully true that each rupture is unique unto itself.

Thunder on Sycamore Street

Written by Reginald Rose and directed by Franklin J. Schaffner.

Presented by *Westinghouse Studio One in Hollywood*.

Produced by CBS. Aired on March 15th, 1954.

Thunder on Sycamore Street was broadcast on the *Westinghouse Studio One* anthology series over CBS-TV on March 15, 1954. The episode was inspired by real life events in suburban Cicero, Illinois in which a group of residents banded together to kick an African American family out of the neighborhood. As one might predict, Rose faced heavy backlash and censorship for his teleplay from the network, agency, and sponsor for his casting of an African American

family. All these institutions demanded he change the African-American family to “something else” (Barnouw, *Image Empire* 34).

Rose had hoped he could still make good on the idea, despite pushback in the past around racial content. As Rose noted of the incident, “Everybody knew [you could not do a story about blacks moving into a white neighborhood], except me. Oh, I know it, but I thought I could maybe get it by” (Qtd. In Stempel 42). It was a particularly charged moment in history, as the teleplay premiered just two months before the *Brown v. Board* decision. Despite the censorship and subsequent removal of the African American family at the center of the story, Rose attempted a more subversive route around the suppression, “hoping that the principle under observation would be strong enough to rouse an audience” (Qtd. In Stempel 52).

In his edited teleplay, Rose tells the story of a group of neighbors on ‘Sycamore street’ that hatch a plan to force out an ex-convict and his family who have recently moved in to the neighborhood. The teleplay takes place just 20 minutes before the neighbor’s are to carry out their plan. We see the action unfold three times in three different homes. First in the home of the leader of the mob. We watch this man, Frank Morrison, in his living room as he anxiously and excitedly awaits the action to come—all the while riling himself into a kind of hyper-masculine persona. Next, we meet Arthur Hayes, the timid neighbor who is wracked with guilt at the imminent action. Finally, we are taken into Mr. Blake’s home, the convict himself, where we watch as his family responds to the news about what is going to take place.

After the three repetitions, the neighbors form a mob in front of the Blake home but are dismayed when Joseph Blake himself confronts them. After Blake is hit in the head with a rock, Arthur Hayes comes to his aid, and in so doing we can understand him to be reclaiming the power that had previously eluded him. This stepping forward comes to represent a dual act in

which Arthur is able to repossess his masculinity as well as rise to a hero status (and stand up against the oppressor).

It is safe to assume that Rose used the vagueness surrounding what the Blake family did in the first two acts of the teleplay to his advantage, both as an attempt to sidestep the heavy censorship he faced as well as to experiment with the teleplay's structure. By not disclosing what is 'wrong' with the Blake family until the last possible moment (two-thirds of the way into the teleplay), Rose allows the audience to draw their own conclusions. Hopefully asking, in Rose's mind, could this be a racial issue?

Aside from the 'daring' social content, the teleplay is also important because of its formal experiments with time and structure. Each of the glimpses inside the family homes begins with the narrator's declaration that it is "20 minutes to 7pm." This plot device builds a sense of tension, both from the disruption of a linear chronology and by the simultaneity that demands holding three separate locations as occupying the same time-space. Staging this in a live studio would be an extra challenge and perhaps foreshadows the disadvantage of live theatrical style performance in comparison to the editing possibilities of filmed productions.

Another interesting tension lies in the teleplay's dichotomy of 'outside versus inside.' Each act begins as exterior shot of the neighborhood, but quickly we are ushered inside the three homes where the private action is enacted. It is fitting that the culminating action of the third act takes place outside on the street in the public view. Here we have the thread of the public trial that repeats itself again and again in each of the social trauma genre teleplays. In the social trauma narratives, the outside infiltrates the inside and then in turn the inside may only be resolved in the outer sphere. This is the nature of trauma, where something external crashes in on

the inner world and the subject then must struggle to find equilibrium in a world forever changed. The inside may only be resolved outside.

It is impossible to watch *Thunder on Sycamore Street* and not find specific themes and rhetoric prescient of contemporary social dilemmas. Stirring up the anxieties of a populace (fear mongering) has always been a means to push a group toward malevolent action. The ‘other’ is treated as alien, toxic, and dangerous. In *Thunder on Sycamore Street* the convict serves as the ‘other,’ the one who serves as a magnet for fear and hate. Beyond having a keen ear for how scapegoating manifests, Rose also gives us a psychological portrait of anxieties that underpin fear mongering. For instance, the teleplay highlights how threats to masculine identity may be used as a language of hate, as do related calls to resist being hemmed in or ‘castrated’ by what we now call ‘political correctness.’

FRANK: This is something big, you know that, Clarry? We’re getting action without pussyfooting for once. That’s it. That’s the big part. There’s too much pussyfooting going on all the time. Can’t hurt anyone’s feelings. Every time you turn around you’re hurting some idiot’s feelings. Well that’s tough, I say...

CLARICE (*indicating Roger*): Frank...

FRANK: He can hear! He’s old enough. You want something bad, you gotta go out and get it! That’s how this world is. Boy, I like this Clarry. You know what it makes me feel like? It makes me feel like a man! (Act I, 40).

You can hear echoes of today’s headlines clearly in here; that worrying about “some idiot’s feelings” or “pussyfooting” (as opposed to grabbing) are clearly horrors to be avoided by any manly man.

At another level, Rose's teleplay saliently illustrates the intersecting realms of public space and private life, as I argue all social trauma narratives do. From the very beginning of the teleplay, Rose shows us that public fictions are recreated and contained within the private home and family unit. When Frank first arrives home, his two children are playing a violent cowboy game. As they fight, Frank's wife tells him to do something about it. Frank's response is to shoot the children with a toy gun. Rose's stage direction here speaks even further to public repetitions in private and cycles of violence: "*Frank shoots him with the cap pistol...He walks away. Frank watches him, still not giving up the cowboy pose.*" The cowboy and gunslinger are quintessential figures of the American myth. Violence is as American as apple pie and you can find it in the great outdoors or at home right in your living room.

Gowda describes Rose's writing style as "that of the realistic social worker, not that of the fabricator of popular or romantic fiction" (Gowda 111). As such, the teleplay veers into melodrama at moments. In one particular instance, Phyllis, Arthur's wife, lays into the morally anxious Arthur, "It's not a question of right, Artie. Don't you see? It's something we have to do, right or wrong. Do you want them to live next door to you? Do you really want them?" Here we also might find an echo of another gender trope, that of the castrated man being goaded into action by his wife. From *Lady Macbeth* to *Sycamore Street*, women are enlisted in the task of getting a man to act like a man—a man only recognizable by his willingness to engage in murder or mayhem. One assumes that a social worker would not approve of such tactics.

Noon on Doomsday

Written by Rod Serling and directed by Daniel Petrie.

Presented by *The United States Steel Hour*

Produced by The Theatre Guild. Aired on April 25th, 1956

Noon on Doomsday is one of the most famous—or infamous--teleplays to come out of the golden age of television. Rod Serling was hoping to retell the story of Emmett Till, an African American teenager from Chicago who was murdered by a group of white men in Mississippi in 1955. In a historic act, Till's mother held an open-casket funeral and invited reporters from all over the world to document and photograph his body, which was beaten to a pulp and nearly unrecognizable.

In some versions of the teleplay's history, Serling attempted recreate this story for television, in a slightly altered Southern locale, moving the action to Georgia not Mississippi, while still intending to depict a place where “the Daughter of the Confederacy...mourn [their civil war dead] as if they fell last Monday” (Serling, I-1-I-2). Rod Serling later reflected on the saga, noting that, “I guess for stories of Negro and white, he [the writer] must look to off Broadway, or to his own summer theatre barn that he must build himself” (Qtd. In Burack 359).

However, according to Tony Albaralla (writing in the Serling Foundation archives), Serling knew full well that such a story would never get by the institutional restrictions of the time. Instead, he planned a story about the murder of a Jewish pawnshop owner. Apparently, a reporter got wind of the intention and once again Serling had to redact the script. Instead, the murder victim was given no specific racial or ethnic identity, just an ‘old man’ of ‘foreign origin.’ It is interesting how censorship so often reveals the contradictions of the censor. In an attempt to spare whoever might object to the depiction of sympathy for a black man or a Jew (Southerners? Christians? Klansmen?), a generic old foreign man is deemed suitable for disposal. This only serves to illustrate the deeper point, scapegoating is not about the ‘goat,’ it is about the need to get rid of something or someone who is deemed unworthy of life, a life seen as dirty, disturbing, different, and disposable. Hatred is not disposable whatever guise it arrives in.

Serling himself looked back painfully on the piece with his characteristic piercing eye.

He noted,

“What destroyed it as a piece of writing was the fact that when it was ultimately produced, its thesis had been diluted, and my characters had mounted a soap box to shout something that had become too vague to warrant any shouting. The incident of violence that the play talked about should have been representative and symbolic of a social evil. It should have been treated as if a specific incident was symptomatic of a more general problem. But by the time ‘Noon on Doomsday’ went in front of a camera, the only problem recognizable was that of a TV writer having to succumb to the ritual of track covering so characteristic of the medium he wrote for.” (Serling 23)

Here Serling gives an excellent view of the social trauma genre writer’s intent. There is the wish to tackle a social evil through a representative and symbolic form and there is the hope to provide an aesthetic experience that isn’t just ‘soap box shouting’ (or at least if it’s to be shouted from a soapbox, the shouts should be sharp, undiluted and hit home).

Looking more closely at the teleplay itself, there are certainly portions that would seem to meet Serling’s initial intention to capture something of the blind violence of those who need and use hatred, the stupefied passivity of those who go along, and the deep-seated totalitarian impulse of ‘half the country.’ The lawyer in *Noon on Doomsday* is, without much disguise, named Rod. Though ethically challenged, Rod channels Serling’s soapbox as in the following passage,

ROD

Look, this isn’t just a killer and a victim.
It’s more than that. It’s a whole town
with a set of attitudes; it’s a little group
of people intimidated by outsiders and
ordered to condemn someone in their

midst! Half the country sits in the
bleachers with thumbs down and they
don't *remind* us what is justice –
they *dictate* it!

The social trauma genre not only attempted to depict traumatic wounds in the national psyche, but also more boldly sought to sear the conscience of the majority, to awaken the nation to the wounds being inflicted in our midst, in our name, and in essence dictated by us if we do not object. While one aspect of social trauma narratives is to provide a vehicle for healing a historical wound, it is just as likely that the genre will express the need to identify a wound before it can be healed.

Returning to the question about the relation of playwriting to teleplay writing, Serling wrote versions of *Noon on Doomsday* for both theatre and television. The professor Jon Kraszewski wrote somewhat enigmatically in his article “The Economic and Political Incentives for Television Anthology Writers,” that the television “shifts focus away from the politics of witnessing and onto the politics of speaking” (Kraszewski 14). It’s not clear why this should be so, given that the ‘visual’ aspect of television might make a particularly interesting kind of witnessing. Perhaps, visibility had not developed sufficiently as a technical matter in early television to have brought out this ‘close-up and personal’ possibilities. It is more likely that either plays or teleplays can offer witnessing or speaking or both.

In Serling’s own analysis, in either version *Noon on Doomsday* was “an overwritten play” He also bemoaned the censorship that left him with only a ‘feather duster’ with which to work. He declared,

“It was often tract-like, much too direct, and had a habit of overstatement... it was the impossible task of allegorically striking out at a social evil with a feather duster because

the available symbols for allegory were too few, too far between, and too totally dissimilar to what was actually needed...this track covering takes many forms in television. It is rarely if ever successful, and carries with it an innate transparency that shows it up for what it is.”

Still, Serling was able to give us some powerful words and insights, even in the mouths of murderers. As the murderer Kattell says,

KATTELL

The only thing people do in places like
this is live and die. Two acres and a
front porch and they just live and die.
And after you grub a little while, day
and night, and the only thing in the
whole wide world you’ve got to look
forward to is Saturday nights. You get
sick of it inside, see? You get so sick
you want to die yourself, or you want to
scream, or you want to do something!
You hate something, but you don’t
know what it is. You hate what you are,
and how you live and what you do.
Then you’re drunk. You’re so drunk
you want to look around and find
something to show how much you hate.
And then you see an old man...”

Those do not seem like the words that come from a feather duster, on the contrary they are a trenchant analysis of the petri dish of hatred, a medium of pettiness, boredom, and the inability to absorb the existential dilemmas of being human.

The Strike

Written by Rod Serling. Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner.

Presented by *Studio One in Hollywood*.

Produced by CBS. Aired on June 7th, 1954

Another Serling teleplay takes up the social trauma of the then recent war in Korea. Aired on the *Studio One* series, *The Strike* takes the viewer into the desperate situation of a besieged group of soldiers, as well as their commander Major Gaylord, who is in contact with them from a distance. The teleplay opens with almost Guernica-like imagery as the title slides roll by the battle scene. The G.I.'s are caught in a partially destroyed Korean farmhouse. They are freezing, some are wounded, and all are caught in a desperate situation.

Serling here uses some familiar tropes before giving his own spin. The lost patrol caught behind enemy lines, or pinned down by gunfire, or cut off from their comrades is a well-worn plot device. The twist here arises when Major Gaylord is ordered to bombard the enemy in the area where his men are, almost assuring their deaths. The ethical struggle, the tension of the decision, and the heartbreak are all finely rendered. Serling pushes the social trauma genre toward the underlying conventions of horror—which he will later do on *The Twilight Zone*—at least in so far as a murderous situation is about to arise, with the viewer knowing it may be bound to come, but left uncertain. Also interesting to note and tie back to contemporary pop culture, in a recent radio interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*, the director Jordan Peele described his film *Get Out*, as a “social thriller,” i.e. as a subset of horror that turns on a social and cultural theme—here racism.

The Strike works as an anti-war film in so far as it dares to pull the veil back over the cultural idealizations that war making is usually subject to--patriotic displays, adulation of winning battles and claims of superiority of country. Instead, we see huddled and struggling men left desperate in a chaotic and dangerous world and whose superiors are as likely to abandon as

protect them. The critique is stark—in war your own side will treat you just as it treats the enemy, namely as expendable cannon fodder.

How does the social trauma genre function here as an element of social healing? I'll lay out some further features of the genre in a moment, but I want to highlight that the narratives of this genre do not have to offer something healing or redemptive to play an important social function. In fact, to recognize trauma as trauma rather than promising a solution is itself a potentially healing process. As the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion noted, himself a former tank commander in the first World War, the mind needs truth as a "psychic nutrient" even if this truth is painful to face (Qtd. In Marcus 198). Here is the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen's rendition of Bion's contribution:

"Bion is keenly aware of the destructive and generative impact of emotional truth. On the one hand, he feels that truth is necessary for psychic growth as food is for the body. On the other hand, he is aware that people may be ill prepared to take the impact of truth." (Qtd. In Marcus 197)

Bion uses the experience of truth as one example of explosive consciousness, "If lies poison, truth explodes. Facing truths about one's life explodes the lie one lives" (Qtd. In Marcus 197).

Teleplays of the social trauma narrative attempt to explode with truth the lies that damage a society. Racism, scapegoating, the drumbeat of war--these are all traumatic aspects of American society. The art of the social trauma teleplay is to shine light on such traumas in hopes that we may then start to repair and recover.

Also important to note is that *The Strike* is a precursor to many of the cold war films that emerged in the 60s—such as *Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*. Intriguingly, *The Strike* was given

life again in 1990, this time (and for the first time in a theatrical production) staged by the Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theater in New York, a venue that seems more than fitting.⁴

Other Examples of The Social Trauma Teleplay

A number of early golden age writers took up the social trauma genre, which would be aired on the various anthology series of the day such as the *Armstrong Circle Theater* (13 seasons), *Kraft Television Theatre* (11 seasons), *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (10 seasons), *Studio One* (10 seasons), *The U.S. Steel Hour* (10 seasons), *General Electric Theatre* (9 seasons), *Philco Television Playhouse* (7 seasons), *Goodyear Playhouse* (6 seasons), and *Playhouse 90* (4 seasons).

Below is a brief scattering of teleplays by the leading writers of the age that touched on social themes:

- Rod Serling, *Patterns*, *Kraft Television Theater* (1955). A Rod Serling piece about the costs of corporate culture. It was re-aired the following week due to its popularity which had never happened before.
- Tad Mosel, *The Decision of Arrowsmith*. *Medallion Theater* (1953). Adapted by Tad Mosel from a Sinclair Lewis novel. Starring Henry Fonda and Diana Douglass. Sinclair Lewis wrote on social and political themes. Though the record of the teleplay is absent, Arrowsmith was the medical doctor protagonist of the titular novel, who rebels against the existing system and corruption of the medical establishment.

⁴ “Struggle With Conscience In an Almost Forgotten War” – Wilborn Hampton in *The New York Times*, January 29th, 1990: <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/29/theater/review-theater-struggle-with-conscience-in-an-almost-forgotten-war.html>

- Gore Vidal, *Visit to a Small Planet*. *Goodyear Theater* (1955). A visitor from outer space lands on earth seeking to provoke a war, “something you do very well.” This teleplay was so well received that Vidal turned it into a play, which ran on Broadway for 388 shows.

- Reginald Rose continued to take up a number of social themes. His two-part teleplay on the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti aired in 1960 on the *NBC Sunday Showcase* series. His *Almanac of Liberty* which aired on *Studio One* in Hollywood in 1954, had an interesting mix of politics and mystery. In this teleplay, a group of locals beat up a stranger (a seeming recurring theme of scapegoating in the social trauma genre). The participants find themselves gathered in the town hall, unable to leave, and subject to various exhortations on American patriotism, which are revealed as actually little more than bias and prejudice.

- Paddy Chayefsky’s last teleplay, *The Great American Hoax*. *The 20th Century Fox Hour* (1957). This was another script to look at the inequities of corporate America, this time about the firing of an employee simply because of his age. Ed Wynn played the lead as the man who alters his appearance to return to the company as a younger man.

An interesting offshoot of the golden age social trauma genre was the CBS series, *You Are There*. Moving from radio to television in 1953, newsman Walter Cronkite hosted re-enactments of historical events. While presented as a kind of journalistic historical education, *You Are There* consisted of teleplays that often were ‘visits’ to scenes of historical import or trauma. I would argue that these teleplays functioned in perhaps a simultaneously more naïve and heavy-handed way than the more fictionalized narratives of the dramatic anthology series.

Nevertheless, the very idea of placing the audience at the scene of a historical event that they could ‘witness’ on their screens seems a radical Bardic project. All gathered around the hearth, watching the culture generate myths about world history.

Cronkite famously intoned at the end of each broadcast, “*What sort of day was it? A day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our times... all things are as they were then, and you were there.*” Here are some of the topics covered: the death of Socrates, the Pearl Harbor attacks, the execution of Nathan Hale and the assassination of Julius Caesar (Paul Newman playing Marcus Brutus and Nathan Hale respectively), the capture of Jesse James (with James Dean playing Robert Ford), the Salem Witchcraft trials, the explosion of the Hindenburg, and the Gettysburg Address.

CHAPTER FIVE

Defining the Genre

The social trauma teleplay was a hybrid creature, drawing its form from theatre and finding its first roots in radio. Raymond Williams wrote in his book *Television* that,

“With the coming of television as a majority...It was possible to transmit performances of an orthodox theatrical kind, and it could be argued that the television play was the ultimate realization of the original naturalist convention: the drama of the small enclosed room, in which few characters lived out their private experience of an unseen public world. Since a major structure of feeling, in the art of the period, was in any case of this kind, it is not surprising that many television plays produced this assumption of the nature of representative reality. This was a drama of the box in the same fundamental sense as the naturalist drama had been the drama of the framed stage.” (Williams 52)

The social trauma genre teleplays often turn on the dichotomy between a public and a personal or private sphere, weaving back and forth between them, or inverting (or subverting) their

distinctions. In *Noon on Doomsday*, the town itself plays a central character in the teleplay and the characters each represent something of the wider collective. As the old man on the bench tells the journalist, “If (the town) found Johnny guilty, it’d be like eating your young.”

Thunder on Sycamore Street follows a similar pattern. We could at once identify the mob of neighbors as representative of the public sphere and the three families as the private sphere. However, the Rose script plays on these dichotomies. In the first act, the action takes place in the outside world--whether in a town square, on a sidewalk in front of a cluster of homes, or in a common space. Then the action shifts to the interior life—we find ourselves inside living rooms, shops and bars, or huddled around a radio. By the end of the third act however, the action is back in the exterior.

In a sense these transformations of form resolve as a classically tragic structure, where personal fate unfolds as a vehicle for a mythic, communal, and group themes. We might read the ‘social trauma *tragedy*’ as highlighting collective anxieties and/or dilemmas whose fateful and often fatal resolutions serve some kind of social function. What functions might we identify?

Again and again the writers of the golden age utilize a dystopian picture of the collective’s greed, hatred, prejudice, pettiness, and penchant for violence as an avenue to plead for a radical change in social practice and consciousness. At heart, the makers of social trauma narratives were utopians, however jaded and cynical they appear personally or sprinkle liberally in their productions, one doesn’t have to scratch far beneath the surface to see the project for a different world. A world where truth, justice, and tolerance for all would not be a cliché but a reality.

Before accepting too whole heartedly my pictures of a happy band of utopian writers smoking cigarettes, downing whiskey, and dreaming of a just new world, perhaps we should

linger on the dystopian worlds they often portray. The historian Paul Edwards has described, “closed world narratives” that form a dramatic model which portray “a world radically divided against itself” (Edwards 307). Such closed worlds are both “consumed, but also defined, by a total, apocalyptic conflict” (Edwards 307). He cites films such as *2001*, *Blade Runner*, and *Star Wars*, as forerunners of a computerized and militarized world that we now inhabit, somewhat akin to inhabitants of the Matrix, plugged in, but unaware of their enslavement. Are the dystopian themes of the social trauma genre precursors to these closed narratives? Are there hints of the strictures to come to be found even at the dawn of the home screen age?

I think the links are too tenuous to offer much help. For the golden age writers, however fallen and degraded the world might seem, there was always hope and always the good effort to be made against the blind and the unjust. Part of the nascent hope of the social trauma genre is shown in their stories from fidelity to reality, whereas ‘closed world’ dystopias exist in a radically artificial realm. Though Serling would take up science fiction as a major template for his writing (and we saw a brief visit to that genre by Gore Vidal as well), *The Twilight Zone* was always firmly rooted in a reality that was discernable however tilted or altered. Indeed, I would say that the social trauma narratives are remarkably ‘open’ devices, taking up sometimes tired themes and conventions, but giving them new life as they reveal themselves as vehicles for social accounting, not simply as private or personal storytelling.

If we look backwards rather than forwards from the golden age, we see that radio dramas evolved their own versions of social trauma narrative. This would make sense, for the height of the radio age took place between the two great wars of the 20th century, a time where hope gave way to grim economic realities and frightening political disorder. Neil Verma described depression radio as “a drama of space and time” that moved between “intimate” and

“kaleidosonic” modes of listening. In a review of Verma’s book, Paul Young had his own take, depicting the radio dramatists as “positioning the listener as simultaneously empathetic and democratic in outlook” (Young 2).⁵

Turning back to Verma’s conception of the distinction between the ‘intimate’ and ‘kaleidosonic’ style of the radio dramatists once again, the social trauma genre may be best understood as combining these two dramatic modes. For Verma, the difference between these forms – the intimate play vs. the kaleidosonic radio play—is, “The former type of play speaks to each of us as an individual and is obviously selective about its material; the latter speaks to us as a nation, denying that it selects voices of interest and disavowing the vast technical architecture that brings them to us. Writers tended to use the conventions of intimate radio structures for plays about places, while employing kaleidosonic structures for plays about events” (Verma 68). The social trauma genre teleplay utilized both modes, as the anthology writers emerged from both schools of practice.

CHAPTER SIX

Social Function of Social Trauma Narratives

If, as I have touched on, we consider television to be a social practice, then what might be the different social functions of the social trauma narrative? Saenz likens the act of television viewing to the “Freudian notion of dream work,” and stresses the import, “not of the specific symbols involved in a dream (or a moment of television), but of the dreamer’s (the viewer’s)

⁵ Young goes further to depict this “audiopositioning” as revolutionary (or perhaps utopian): “at a time when Americans’ understanding of speech acts in general revolved around the notion of “testimony” as something less expressive of subjectivity than of the political significance of the facts that testimony reveals, this brave new definition of mind isolates the subject’s interiority and renders it unknowable, even to the subject herself” (Young 2).

particular preoccupations, of her own puzzles of certain condensed or displaced meanings which need sorting out” (Saenz 42). However, the ‘dream’ of television viewing also reflects the broader collective dream of the culture at large. Both modes, to borrow Saenz’s metaphor—the personal dream work and the collective dream work--intersect and reflect back one another.

The four social functions of the social trauma narrative teleplays may be roughly divided as follows:

- 1) They bring attention to areas that the culture might evade or repress. Furthermore, the staging of such dramas may help instigate a process of mourning, where previously a traumatic overwhelm blocked such psychological processing. What Saenz writes about television in general holds especially true for the 1950s live teleplays, “...it offers socially prominent, narrative and rhetorical touchstones which (much like religion) coordinate the specific historicity of its viewers, without determining their entire way of life” (Saenz 42). We can attempt to cope with the traumatic wounds of American race relations, the corporate disruption of communal bonds, the history of the holocaust, and uncertainty in the face of nuclear war (among other themes found in the social trauma genre), partially through the recognition of their status *as* trauma. It is important to stress that in this conception (and Freud’s), mourning must be understood as an ongoing process, not something that is grieved and forgotten. Wounds such as those covered in the teleplays do not simply disappear and indeed what makes mourning as such an impossible quest is that the traumas keep being reenacted, they have not come to a close.

2) From a related but slightly different angle, the social trauma narrative is a form of reassurance, more aligned with catharsis than with a mourning process. The mere fact that the teleplays offer a coherent narrative serves to reassure that the tears in the social fabric caused by catastrophe or traumatic change are not so terrible, after all we can dramatize them, make them semi-fictional, and thus, dilute them. By simulating the “experience of nightmare,” as Peter Brooks writes, the conclusion represents “an awakening brought about by confrontation and expulsion of the villain, the person in whom all evil is seen to be concentrated, and a reaffirmation of the society of ‘decent people’” (Brooks 204).

3) The teleplays represent a press for social change. We might think of (or imagine) more contemporary examples where certain dramatic productions changed the discourse of the culture, or even led to some specific action or amelioration. Perhaps for example certain dramas like *Silkwood* or *Roots* seem to shatter a silence around slavery, but its lasting effects might be more locatable in Black Americans sense of place than in the dominant culture. *Silkwood*, *The China Syndrome*, or even *Erin Brockovich* drew attention to toxic chemical and nuclear effects, though again what influence they had is hard to assess. A single commercial, shown only once during the 1964 presidential contest between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater has been associated with a damaging effect on Goldwater’s candidacy—the ‘Daisy’ attack ad showing a little girl picking a flower while a nuclear missile countdown ensues. It’s also important to note that the Kennedy-Nixon televised debates was widely credited with changing the outcome of that race.

Did any social trauma shows have comparable effects? There does not seem to be a particular show or theme that gravitated from the television set to alter the course of a social or political issue. Yet, to concentrate on a single show or series is to miss the point. It is the genre itself that exerts influence, shaping the wider landscape of the social frame, such that social and political issues otherwise in the dark are brought again and again into the light. Perhaps, the progressive effect of the social trauma narratives lies in this shaping and molding capacity--a push or inflection for widening the scope of cultural discourse.

The writers, producers, and directors of the social trauma anthologies pushed the envelop of what subjects, language, and images were permissible to be projected into America's living rooms. Even where they were denied entrance, the creative energy applied to the challenge of presenting difficult material bore important fruit. These narratives served as models for later developments, an incubator for fresh ideas and talent, as well as a source point for experiments in televisual form.

4) Then there are more strictly psychodynamic functions, such as offering forms for individual viewers—as opposed to the ‘collective’ audience—to foster mourning and relieve anxiety. Social trauma narratives offer a personal journey where identification with the (sacrificial) victim, the rescuer, and (more unconsciously) the perpetrators, may allow a shift in psychological organization. Dramatization is one mode of addressing blocks in the resolution of trauma.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Demise of the Live Teleplay

A number of factors, including but not limited to the political content of the anthology dramas contributed to the downfall of the live anthology show and by the 1954-1955 season the anthology series began its rapid decline. In Barnouw's words, "the death of the live anthology was Hollywood's gain; the trend was to film. The anthology form survived to some extent on film, but was eclipsed by filmed episodic series of upbeat décor, preferred by most sponsors....Above all, the series formula offered security: each program was a variation of an approved ritual" (Barnouw 37).

Anthology writers and directors turned toward feature films and some returned to Broadway. Anthology sponsors also set their sights elsewhere. In 1955 for example, *Philco* converted to a Hollywood-produced series, which set the stage for other sponsors to follow suit. It's also worth noting the stress of producing a unique and entirely new drama every week took its toll on writers, directors, and producers.

While a few anthology series continued to produce work, the social trauma teleplays conceived by Reginald Rose, Rod Serling, Tad Mosel, and others began to be replaced once again by commissioned adaptations. For the scholar Nick Browne, television reached a critical moment during this period when it realized that "its aesthetic is a commercial one" and stopped "trying to ape other arts." Wagner and Maclean describe how Browne understood the end of the golden age anthology drama:

"The shift from live ensemble anthology dramas to a serial format was also a shift away from dialogue and the integrity of the speaking character. Dialogue is predicated on respect for the *you* and *I* relationship implied in it, and it continually investigates and verifies what it means to be an individual self. The shift from dialogue leads, argues Browne, to action and the image. He also identifies a shift from personal psychology

(theatrical investigation) to the standardization and formulization of character types (the serial mode). The character type stands in for what used to be a self.” (Wagner & Maclean 93)

We might also trace the progression of live television to filmed programs, through five key technological developments:

- 1) cuts between multiple cameras (mid-1940s)
- 2) recording of the television image on film (late 1940s)
- 3) shooting of television material on film (early 1950s)
- 4) recording of the television image on tape (late 1950s)
- 5) editing of the tape-recorded image (1960s)

In this timeline, “television becomes less like theatre as it becomes technically more like cinema in its raw materials and how they are manipulated and stored” (Wagner & Maclean 95).

Hollywood was now the name of the game.

Of course technology is never situated in a vacuum. On the one hand it often emerges out of a particular social milieu—war production for instance and the need for advanced optics hastened developments that found their way into commercial production. At the same time, political currents may directly effect what technology is utilized and how—take for example, the regulation of airwaves by the government.

We know as well that the content of any art may be shaped by the exertion of ideological and economic pressures—mass art may be particularly vulnerable in this regard. ‘The Golden Age of Television’ was subject to one of the most flagrant periods of political intrusion on the arts in America, with McCarthyite attacks on broadcasting, conservative action groups threatening sponsors, and the infamous and devastating blacklisting of writers, directors, and producers. The ‘New York sensibility’ of the teleplays disappeared as the anthology programs moved west. To quote Westinghouse advertising director Roger Bolin, “a run of psychological dramas” was causing the sponsors to fear gaining a “reputation for a downbeat type of show”

(Qtd. In Boddy 189). ‘Downbeat’ did not fit the sunny optimism of American salesmanship, and television would soon find its way to a set of comfortable, reassuring, and ultimately positive tropes that would not upset the customers.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Contributions to Contemporary Television

We can roughly trace the lineage of the golden age anthologies to today’s television landscape by first noting the initial utilization of theatrical dramatic modes (an influence itself partly imported from radio dramas). Soon enough, filmic and televisual styles began to supplant live theatrical performance and with this a set of more predictable television forms—the sitcom, the doctor/lawyer/police serial, the variety show, talk show, soap opera, and the news—began to dominate the airways.

Today’s television landscape has seen rapid changes in its modes of delivery—there are multitudes of platforms and content providers (appointment watching, streaming, binging, recording; broadcast cable, premium channels, independent add-on services) yet forms and genres have remained relatively stable. What has seemed to change is a return to more daring and socially relevant forms, including shows we can identify as hinging in some manner, often indirectly, on the social trauma narrative genre. I’ll take a brief look at some representative samples of these new social trauma narrative including *The Simpsons*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Game of Thrones*.

One particular show that encapsulates the social trauma genre (and perhaps somewhat surprisingly so) is *The Simpsons*, the brilliant and biting animated social satire. On air since 1989, the show presents a searing reflection of America. In Matthew Henry’s article, “The Triumph of Popular Culture: Situation Comedy, Postmodernism and The Simpsons,” he

describes the show as a “postmodern pastiche, a collage of (seemingly) unrelated surfaces” that distill into a portrait of American society—with all its complications, trappings, and absurdities (Henry 264).

Composed like a 70s sitcom, *The Simpsons* depicts a working class American family, with all their trials and tribulations, but rendered abject in their animated representation. Because the show is a cartoon it affords a certain amount of space to ‘go there’ politically, socially, and ethically. The rules and boundaries of reality as we know it are not the same in Springfield—in this world things are more than slightly askew, which, like Brecht’s alienation effect, helps to draw attention to that which is often obscured, obscene, unjust, and irrational (and perhaps delusional) in contemporary American culture.

Deploying humor, relatable characters, and fantastic wordplay, *The Simpsons* has the incisive ability to lay bare our societal and personal unconscious desires and fears. In Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall’s essay for *Vulture*, “Why *The Simpsons* Is The Best TV Show Ever,” they make the argument that when a “program remains part of national life for more than two decades, it ceases to be a mere show and becomes something in between an institution and a utility.” (NY Mag, 2016, Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall). *The Simpsons* has indeed entered the collective American unconscious.

The show’s grip on American culture is strikingly illustrated in the playwright Anne Washburn’s brilliant 2012 play, *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, which uses *The Simpsons* as a vehicle to investigate how pop culture taps into our unconscious storehouse of memory. The play is a meditation on theatre, culture and storytelling more generally. The timeframe of the play spans 82 years, all following some nebulous world catastrophe. We are given witness to an

evolution in the culture of the post-apocalypse as the re-telling of *The Simpsons* evolves like a cultural game of telephone with every era.

First, as the survivor's regale each other with memories from particular episodes (i.e. "eat my shorts"), you sense the freshness of the recall and the excited urgency of connecting to a loved and shared experience in the midst of such bleak surroundings. Next, 7 years later the same characters have begun to recreate *The Simpsons* less as a memory and more like a theatrical performance; a 'stage adaptation.' from a more hesitant store of knowledge. Finally, 75 years further on *The Simpsons* bears little resemblance to the original animated series and is now a full-fledged opera, declaiming its own plot, characters, and themes. With each changing act, Washburn appears to pose a number of questions. How do our stories change over time? What splinters remain when a culture implodes? And how does a civilization renew itself, if it indeed can, though art—either to recover what has been lost, or find new infusions of creative energy?

Examining the early social trauma teleplays in relation to today's television equivalents might be imagined as a version of Washburn's play. Each new show represents a variation on previous forms, evolving or de-volving, but never static. The further removed we are from the milieu of 1950's television, the less accurate it seems to call succeeding eras the 'next Golden Age.' Each age has its own concerns and its own forms. To what degree today's current crop of shows that hover in the social trauma genre draw upon their predecessors may vary between productions. Whether direct, indirect, or far removed, no contemporary drama is without some influence from the generative energy of the first television pioneers.

The Sopranos reprises and opens up the generic conventions of the American gangster/Mafia film. Unlike the crime films of the 60s, 70s, and 80s though, *The Sopranos* moves one central plot to an even more interior scene than the family home or the neighborhood

strip club, namely behind the closed doors of Tony Soprano's therapist's office. This plot device serves to deepen the emotional resonance and complexity of the drama--Tony Soprano is at once a familiar American gangster and yet also seemingly just like us. As Wallace Katz writes in an article about the moral makeup of the show, "...even though Tony Soprano is a criminal, he is a mirror image of ourselves. Which is why his existence opens up a window on the dilemmas of American society at the dawn of the twenty-first century" (Katz 95).

The Sopranos draws upon the conventions of the gangster film (particularly the modern gangster drama championed by the likes of Scorsese) as well as the family melodrama that had emerged as a central genre in the 1950s. However, unlike many standard crime dramas, *The Sopranos* forges a unique relationship between the fictionalized reality of the show itself and the actual reality of American life. We definitely know that we are in *our* world, yet oddly so, since one assumes most viewers are not part of a mafia crew. This is an alternate reality, but despite its seeming specificity--New Jersey mob life-- the frame does not appear tied to one place, one time, or one view.

The show's opening credit theme song, "Woke Up This Morning," captures the mix of the earthly and the otherworldly, the specific and the mythic, as in these lines:

"You woke up this morning
 Got yourself a gun
 Mama always said you'd be
 The Chosen One.
 She said: You're one in a million
 You've got to burn to shine
 But you were born under a bad sign

With a blue moon⁶ in your eyes” (Alabama 3, 1997)

The Sopranos showrunner David Chase manages to present an almost meta-theatrical crime drama by writing into the show specific pop culture references. Wallace Katz writes that references to pop culture in *The Sopranos* are “both the subject and the object of the series,” [Chase] “gives us a Mafia boss who’s seen all the Mafia films and TV series and who’s quite self-conscious about the genre” (Katz 93). Tony exists in his own world and yet is aware of ours. To point to one example--the removal of the Twin Towers after 9/11 in the opening credits of *The Sopranos* (a choice that has garnered much attention) places the show in our time. This is also a time with grimy roads, worn shops and tired sex shows, yet all the while aiming for something transcendent—to be the chosen one, the one in a million. Yet, whatever the realities and whatever the dreams, the blue moon in your eyes cannot easily be gotten around.

In terms of social trauma, *The Sopranos* shows us trauma’s slow burn. Of course the sudden bursts of furious violence demonstrates the vicious reach of trauma—no one is really safe (except we suspect the protagonist, i.e. us). Yet, mostly we are given witness to the decay of American solidity, a society where economic and familial structures are frayed or broken. Here we glimpse the psychological contradictions of a culture that promotes power, while fomenting panic; that offers the promise of a familial safe haven in a heartless world, but knows that no corner of our lives is truly safe from the ravages of a torn and battered society.

The Wire watches as though it is a cinéma vérité film – life-like, detailed, and almost documentary. As Hua Hsu suggests, “by offering itself as a gritty, meticulous, and therefore more realistic alternative to traditional televisual representations of police work and urban

⁶ ‘Blue moon’ has many meanings. It refers to an extra full moon in certain months, which has sometimes been read as a bad sign.

turmoil—the series rewards its most careful viewers with access to what we presume to be a trustworthy, unfiltered experience of life in Baltimore” (Hsu 510). Unlike the artificial world of *CSI* or *SVU*, *The Wire* illustrates a slice of urban American-life on the epic scale of a Greek-tragedy.

The Wire, like *The Sopranos*, takes up the reality of the outside world in a surprising way. The authenticity of Baltimore is illustrated so complexly and so specifically with an “affection for the quotidian,” that “*The Wire* seems to aspire toward some condition of documentary truth” (Hsu 510). *The Wire* does not ignore wide swaths of people, instead it does the opposite—drawing attention to the underrepresented in television in sensitive and complicated detail. There is a “narrative slowness” that permeates the series, which not only tests viewers’ patience but also allows them to sift through the layers of narrative complexity in order to tease out the larger societal and economic issues at stake and at work in the world (Hsu 510).

The Wire’s hyperrealism explores the modern urban landscape where both cop and criminal have codes of honor and modes of brutality, and where the political and economic structures of our time offer little solace or resources to life lived on the level of the street. Again, we find social trauma located not as a specific incident or historical rupture, but rather as the ongoing degradation of daily life, where murder and chaos erupt. However, even if the viewer has no day-to-day experience of such mayhem, we can *feel* the underlying currents of cultural disruption in our time. The outer world of *The Wire*--where crime is about survival as much as greed and where justice is rarely just, and very often brutal—gives a facsimile to an inner sense of danger, an internal world where few things feel stable or solid.⁷

⁷ It is interesting that in a recent political campaign in Iceland, the one time mayor of Reykjavik stated that he wouldn’t form a coalition with any party that hadn’t watched the entire series of

Game of Thrones is another contemporary example of an indirect social trauma narrative. Inside the remove of an imagined fantasy world, the machinations of political intrigue and violence, ethnic and tribal conflict, sexual excess, and dark arts, bear a semblance to present day social threats, ruptures, and themes. In one of the New Yorker TV critic Emily Nussbaum's more salient reviews, she writes that *Game of Thrones* functions as an "aesthetic Esperanto" that "lets us talk about politics without fighting about the news" (Nussbaum, "The Westeros Wing" in *The New Yorker*). The fantasy genre allows actions and anxieties to play out on a grand exaggerated scale—a giant wall, enormous people, dragons, slaves, incestuous romance, murder and grisly mayhem, political stratagem, ethnic cleansing, ghosts, ghouls, and apocalyptic threat ("winter is coming!").

It is not fanciful to re-imagine these themes as versions of lurid social anxieties—from climate change to demagogic rulers; fears of war, infection, or what lies on the other sides of walls; family politics as a particularly nasty form of political machinations. Social trauma spills out in the constant 'red wedding' themes of the show. However, unlike some of the 'red', i.e. progressive politics of the 1950's teleplay, today's dystopian dramas are rife with contradictions about their social vision. For violence is inherent not only in the dramatic force of these productions, but in a worldview that seemingly endorses force as the most viable means of confronting trauma. This isn't entirely so, many of the main characters rely on wiles and intelligence to survive, yet even so, it is often not clear whether the show is portraying trauma or enacting it.

The Wire. Apparently even Iceland can feel like Baltimore in our current era.
(<https://news.vice.com/article/icelands-anarchist-comedian-mayor-is-moving-to-texas>)

Game of Thrones has come under particular fire for its treatment of rape and sexual humiliation. Granted that any ‘premium’ show seems required to have its requisite number of sex scenes to draw an audience, the sexual violence on GOT appears gratuitous. Perhaps it is fair to raise the question about whether a dramatic narrative can address trauma without re-traumatizing its audience. There is no simple answer to this question, and we might not want to retreat to the earnest moral certainties of the original anthology series. Yet, as television continues to evolve one wonders how much room remains for the working-through of societal ruptures, rather than simply being treated to one more spectacle on today’s menu of trouble and trauma.

CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here?

*America this is quite serious/
America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set/
America is this correct?*
- Allen Ginsburg

Television has changed dramatically since the premiere of the first anthology show in 1947. The rules of the game have seemingly changed. We have more ways to watch television than ever before and new models of producing, viewing, and purchasing our content. This is the age of Netflix and Amazon, where algorithm’s become the new producer/curator. In a 2015 paper published by Netflix’s VP of Product Innovation and Chief Product Officer entitled, “The Netflix Recommender System: Algorithms, Business Value, and Innovation,” they explain the Netflix recommendation system:

“Humans are facing an increasing number of choices in every aspect of their lives—certainly around media such as videos, music, and books, other taste-based questions such as vacation rentals, restaurants, and so on, but more importantly around areas such as health insurance plans and treatments and tests, job searches, education and learning,

dating and finding life partners, and many other areas in which choice matters significantly. We are convinced that the field of recommender systems will continue to play a pivotal role in using the wealth of data now available to make these choices manageable, effectively guiding people to the truly best few options for them to be evaluated, resulting in better decisions.” (Uribe & Hunt 16)

Ironically, with the proliferation of shows, streaming platforms, and all kinds of “content” to consume, we have entered an age of post-choice—where computer’s help decide what we should watch and algorithms ‘suggest’ to us new television shows.

With this major shift, new ways of describing and thinking about television have also emerged. As John Caldwell notes, “The rhetorical shift from talking about productions as ‘programs’ to talking about them as ‘content’ underscores the centrality of repurposing in industrial practice. The term ‘content’ frees programs from a year-long series and network-hosted logic and suggests that programs are quantities to be drawn and quartered, deliverable on cable, shippable internationally, and streamable on the Net” (Caldwell 49-50).

Yet with these veritable changes, the differences between today and the golden age of television are not always so stark. Consider “Quality TV,” the term used to encapsulate many of the prestige dramas of the past few decades. In Jane Feuer’s famous essay, “Quality TV and HBO,” she traces the term back to the anthology dramas: “On the one hand they defined themselves as quality because they exploited an essential characteristic of their medium: the ability of television to broadcast live in ways films could not. On the other hand their prestige came from an association with a ‘higher’ form of art: theatre, a form that at this time was widely acknowledged by intellectuals as superior to the film medium as well” (Qtd. In McCabe 146).

What has also remained the same is television’s relationship to consumerism--to being packaged, marketed and sold. The landscape of branded content, which is code for advertising

under the guise of ‘quality television,’ shares much with the sponsors of anthology shows. It may be more discreet or subtle today, yet there are shared echoes. Another reverberation between the first golden age and today is the relationship of theatre to television. More and more playwrights are writing for television—there are seemingly more jobs and money although with the proliferation of television shows writer’s wages have significantly decreased and by many accounts we may be approaching another writer’s strike.

Finally we come to the social trauma genre. Through shows like *Game of Thrones* and *The Wire*, *The Simpsons*, and *Homeland*, contemporary television continues to take up the complexities of our current era. David Byrne was right to say that, “Television made me what I am.” For TV continues to make and reiterate our social surround—in ways both revolutionary and troubling. To echo Horace Newcomb who elegantly and incisively investigates modes of television, “Rather than a medium that “polices,” “instructs,” “affects” us, I consider [television] a medium that presents repertoires – some as despicable as others are noble – and that the elements we select from those offerings of meaning, belief, behavior, emotion and performance fit variously into our experience” (Newcomb 21).

In David Thorburn’s important essay on television melodrama he closes with a passage by Francis Fergusson writing about the theatre. In Thorburn’s eyes, Fergusson reminds us “that genuinely popular dramatic art is always powerfully conservative in certain ways, offering stories that ‘insist on their continuity with the common sense of the community’” (Thorburn 607). Fergusson cites Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theatre which, “was itself a mirror which had been formed at the center of the culture of its time, and at the center of the life and awareness of the community.” Thorburn ends with this passage to argue that while television does not have a Shakespeare, it’s time we took notice of the “Thomas Kyd’s” “Marlowe’s” and

“Ben Jonson’s” of our popular form. In today’s digital era, television plays a similar central role as the Elizabethan theatre—we should continue to foster that. Television is the Elizabethan theatre of today.

The tears in the social fabric—such as the post-war anxieties about the bomb, the paranoia of McCarthyism seeping into everyday life, the fight for and against civil rights, as well as today’s rapid escalation of climate change and the resistance to addressing it, and the proliferation of extremist politics and a vitriolic ideologue, are always reflected in the dramatic forms of an era. Moreover, plays and teleplays are often directly aimed at addressing sites of cultural change and anxiety. Drama is an attempt to give form to our terrors.

There is no doubt that television will continue to respond to the terrors and traumas to come. We need television shows that challenge the powers that be and ask hard questions of viewers. We must never forget the history of American television. The live television dramas of the 1950s boldly spoke out against prejudice, violence, and intolerance. It is my hope that television continues in the tradition of these anthology writers, directors, and producers. Once again, we need them more than ever.

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The Paley Center for Media

New York, NY and Beverly Hills, CA.

WORKS SCREENED

Marty

Television:

Philco-Goodyear Television Playhouse, NBC, 05/24/1953

Director: Delbert Mann

Producer: Fred Coe

Writer: Paddy Chayefsky

Cast: Rod Steiger (AS), Nancy Marchand

The Golden Age of Television, Criterion Collection, 2009

Film:

MGM 1955

Director: Delbert Mann

Producer: Harold Hecht and Burt Lancaster

Writer: Paddy Chayefsky

Cast: Ernest Borgnine, Betsy Blair

Awards: *Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Screenplay* (Oscars)

Palme D'Or at Cannes Film Festival

Television:

Thunder on Sycamore Street

Westinghouse Studio One, CBS 03/15/1954

Director: Franklin J. Schaffner

Writer: Reginald Rose

The Paley Center for Media, New York and Los Angeles

Television:

Noon on Doomsday

The United States Steel Hour, ABC, 04/25/1956

Director: Daniel Petrie

Writer: Rod Serling

Cast: Albert Salmi, Everett Sloane, Jack Warden, Lois Smith, Philip Abbott

The Paley Center for Media, New York

Television:

The Strike

Westinghouse: Studio One, CBS, 06/07/1954

Director: Franklin J. Schaffner

Writer: Rod Serling

Cast: James Daly, Roy Roberts, Bert Freed

Rod Serling: Studio One Dramas, The Archive of American Television, 2008

Television:

Patterns

Kraft Playhouse Theatre, NBC, 01/12/1955

Director: Fielder Cook

Writer: Rod Serling

Cast: Elizabeth Montgomery, Everett Sloan, Richard Kiley, Ed Begley

The Golden Age of Television, Criterion Collection, 2009

Television:

Visit to a Small Planet

Goodyear Playhouse, NBC, 05/8/1955

Director: Jack Smight

Writer: Gore Vidal

Cast: Edward Andrews, Theodore Bikel, Sylvia Davis

The Paley Center for Media, New York

Television:

You Are There, series

CBS

5 seasons, 1953-1971

Directors include: Sidney Lumet, Bernard Girard, William D. Russell

Writers include: Don Clark, Jack Bennett, Jeremy Daniel, E. Jack Neuman

Cast: Walter Cronkite

The Paley Center for Media, New York